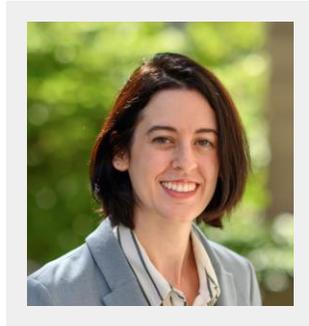




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



Name: Emily Cooley

Law School: University of Pennsylvania Carey Law

Organization: Philadelphia Legal Assistance

Update 1: I'm working at Philadelphia Legal Assistance this summer with support from Equal Justice America. I'm an intern in the Family Law Unit where I am assisting pro se litigants with custody and support matters. There is a huge need for family law assistance in Philadelphia and I feel fortunate to be doing this work! Stay tuned for more updates throughout the summer and please support EJA, an organization that is working hard to close the justice gap for people who cannot afford legal representation.

Update 2: The last few weeks at Philadelphia Legal Assistance have been busy and I feel like I've learned a ton already. I've observed court, assisted over 20 clients, and I continue to deepen my understanding of custody and how it intersects with other areas of law. And on a fun note—PLA recently celebrated its 25th anniversary at the Philadelphia Zoo, where I saw some monkeys and rode the carousel :)

Update 3: This summer I'm receiving funding from Equal Justice America to work in the Family Law Unit at Philadelphia Legal Assistance.

Here are some facts about custody in Philadelphia that folks may not know:

- It can take many court dates and over a year to resolve a custody matter
- Due to limited legal aid resources, the vast majority of litigants in family court have to represent themselves, including in domestic violence matters
- Once an order is in place, a party cannot relocate to another jurisdiction without complying with certain legal requirements

Update 4: One of the best things about my summer has been working on a team. There are four of us interning in the Family Law Unit at Philadelphia Legal Assistance, and we share an office. When I'm unsure how to answer a client's question, how to phrase a legal argument in a document I'm drafting, or how to interpret the meaning of statute, I can turn to the person next to me and talk through it before having to ask my supervising



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attorney. Plus, the four of us can turn to each other for emotional support when things get stressful.

Because we all work on similar family law issues but no two cases are the same, we are constantly learning from one another. This has given me a window into what it will be like to work with colleagues in my future legal career. I'm very grateful to have had this experience alongside my fellow interns!

Update 5: This is my final EJA Fellow Update as I reflect on my summer interning at Philadelphia Legal Assistance. As an intern in the Family Law Unit, I primarily assisted pro se litigants with custody and protection from abuse matters. There is a huge need for family law assistance in Philadelphia, and most people represent themselves in Family Court because they cannot afford attorneys.

I had a busy summer working with 45 clients and gaining a window into how large legal aid organizations like PLA operate. Most importantly, working with clients allowed me to see first-hand how experiences of poverty, systemic racism, and domestic violence can combine to create barriers to people achieving their goals in court.

In addition to my work in the office, I was able to observe several judges at Family Court, and I worked several shifts at the Custody Help Center. The Help Center is located on the same floor where people file for custody at Family Court. It's open from 12-3pm every weekday and is staffed by PLA as well as volunteer attorneys from other area organizations. There, pro se litigants can get assistance completing their petitions and the numerous forms that must accompany those filings.

I had already had some exposure to family law through being a student advocate in the Custody and Support Assistance Clinic (CASAC) at Penn Law during my 1L year. But spending 10 weeks in the Family Law Unit over the summer was a much more intense, immersive experience that cemented my interest in family law and direct services. I'm so glad I got the opportunity to experience what it's like to do this work full-time, and it reaffirmed my commitment to a future legal career in direct services.

As I mentioned in a previous update, getting to work in person with three other Family Law interns was a wonderful experience, especially coming out of COVID when so many things happened over Zoom. Actually being in the PLA offices and working alongside other people was more enjoyable than I even expected. I got to make connections and form friendships with students at other Philadelphia law schools, something that feels particularly important to me as I plan to live and work in the Philly area long-term. Additionally, our two supervisors, Angela and Sarah, were fantastic mentors as we all experienced both the joys and stresses of working in direct services.

Thank you Equal Justice America for providing me with the opportunity to do this valuable work. I'm so grateful for the experience, and excited to continue my legal education!