



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:

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Organization: Community Legal Services of Philadelphia

Update 1: This summer, I am working at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia as a law student intern. I am grateful to Equal Justice America Fellowship program for making this incredible summer opportunity possible. Equal Justice America

As an intern at the SSI unit, I am tasked with assisting disabled or elderly clients in poverty obtain supplemental social security benefits. Like many other areas of legal aid work, demonstration of SSI eligibility has become increasingly important in a time of prolonged public health emergency, especially since persons eligible for SSI also automatically qualify for Medicaid benefits. The past three weeks has been a combination of comprehensive training and hands-on legal practice. And as much as I find the work incredibly rewarding, it soon became painfully clear to me how deeply problematic and dysfunctional the SSI application and appeals processes are, which desperately calls for both more access to legal services and administrative improvements on a systemic level. In the coming weeks, I will continue to educate and better myself through both direct client representation and systemic advocacy under the supervision of the wonderful staff attorneys at CLS.

Update 2: Can't believe I am already halfway through my summer internship at CLS -- which means it's also time for my second EJA Fellow update.

In the past two weeks I took on two SSI cases that were previously denied disability benefits and are currently at the appeals hearing stage. In preparation of the hearings and drafting the pre-hearing statements, I sifted through my clients' medical records. They chronicle obvious debilitating mental and physical impairments long endured by my clients, which contrast bitterly with the denial letters provided by the Social Security Administration, casually trivializing the pain and suffering of some of the most marginalized people in our community. Discussions among community advocates reveal an alarming pattern of various obstacles facing disabled, low-income people seeking benefits. The tortuous application and appeals process and undertrained, unsympathetic case workers are only part of the story. Months and often years of wait time, the difficulty with which to reach a representative at SSA by phone, poor language access, the frustration and humiliation of having to repeatedly recount one's trauma and impairments to unsympathetic strangers, extra barriers facing immigrants and formerly incarcerated people -- these hurdles, singularly and collectively, have deprived so many from essential needs that anyone in a civilized society should be entitled to.



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This past Tuesday, CLS hosted a roundtable discussion where community advocates in Philadelphia voiced many of these concerns stemming from their dealings with SSA to several members of Congress, all of whom expressed their commitment to push for improvements on policy and legislative levels. Legal advocates and social workers eagerly anticipate substantive changes to the SSI program, because dignified living cannot wait.

Update 3: With my client's SSI hearing in front of an administrative law judge coming up, I spent the past week drafting a pre-hearing statement highlighting her need of and entitlement to federally-funded financial assistance, double-checking facts and statements from the medical record with her to eliminate inconsistencies, and preparing myself and the client for the hearing. Handling the arduous process of an SSI appeal from beginning to end afforded me useful training on factual investigation, written and oral advocacy as well as client communication, all of which are skills that law school curriculum touches on but can be improved only through hands-on practice. The hearing will be conducted in the coming week -- more to come!

Update 4: Last week, I handled my first ever hearing in front of an administrative law judge. The hearing was conducted over the phone because of the ongoing pandemic. After I gave an opening statement, the judge patiently listened and took notes as I guided the client through a series of questions highlighting the various ways in which her debilitating mental health issues have been preventing her from working a full-time job and interfering with her daily life. The hearing ended with a cross examination with a vocational expert, who concurred that a person in a situation similar to my client would not be able to hold down a job in the national economy.

As our team awaits the judge's final decision which will likely come out in a month or two, I would like to share some alarming facts about the SSI program. As a nationalized safety net program, SSI was put in place in 1972 to guarantee the bare minimum of dignified living of some of the neediest individuals in this country. Eligibility for SSI should be based on and only on this universal recognition for dignified living. However, the Supreme Court recently decided in *United States v. Vaello Madero* that the equal protection component of the Fifth Amendment does not require Congress to extend SSI to four of the five US territories, including Puerto Rico, which is estimated to host more than 300,000 individuals who would have otherwise qualified for SSI.

Update 5: This is my final EJA Fellow update for the summer. The past four updates have touched on the types of work in the SSI unit, my clients' stories, systemic flaws within the social security administration and advocacy work in response, and alarming facts about the current state of social welfare. As this is my last post for the summer, it will be focused on my own experience and growth.

My 10-week internship at the SSI unit of Community Legal Services of Philadelphia has been an incredibly rewarding and humbling experience. Under close supervision, I gained exposure to a wide range of legal work — I interviewed clients, drafted pre-hearing statements, prepared a client for their appeals hearing and represented them at the hearing, conducted factual investigations and legal research, drafted memos on language access



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protected under Title VI, and facilitated systemic advocacy work in collaboration with members of Congress. I am grateful to everyone at Community Legal Services — and my supervisors at the SSI unit in particular — for making my summer internship so enriching, intellectually challenging, and most of all fun.

Being able to put all the legal research and writing trainings from 1L year into actual practice was a fulfilling experience, but I was also humbled by the fact that much of the nuances and skills necessary for legal practice can only be learned from, well, practice. How does one break bad news to the client? How does one balance providing effective and zealous advocacy with staying strictly within the bounds of professional ethics? How does one go about highlighting to the judge all the ways in which a client's disability has rendered them incapable for work and in need of federal financial assistance without making the client feel disempowered and ashamed? How does one conduct interviews that inevitably involve invasive questions on private and oftentimes humiliating information? How does one urge the rectification of discriminatory policies of another organization without damaging the existing working relationship? How does one track down a client who's gone missing? These were all real issues which I had to navigate through trial and error and with lots of help from my supervisors. My endeavor to exploring ways in which I could improve my practice in these aspects beyond pure legal work reaffirmed the idea that legal advocacy work, at its core, should be client-centered and focused on empowerment and independence. What we as legal professionals assume to be the best strategy or desired outcome doesn't always overlap perfectly with the client's needs and goals, which is why it's crucial to be able to step back from the law and reflect on the nature and impact of one's work and the ultimate goals for the client. This is the single more important lesson I learned from my summer internship and will be carrying with me for the rest of my career.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Equal Justice America for funding my summer internship at a public interest organization. Besides reflecting on my own experience, I have been equally inspired from reading other Equal Justice America Fellows' updates and learning about their unique experience tackling various other issues plaguing low-income communities. Legal organizations and professionals in public interest routinely suffer from underfunding and undercompensation, which in turn affects the organizations' capacity to satisfy the overwhelming legal aid demand in the community. Equal Justice America seeks to remedy this chronic problem and increase access to civil legal services for low-income communities by funding law students and advocates in their public interest endeavor. As always, if you are able, please donate to Equal Justice America to support their mission.