



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: The past three weeks have been a deep dive into the world of dependency. This has included learning about the different types and sequence of hearings that are held to determine whether a child should be removed from their parents. If the answer is yes, then the child is removed and placed into the foster care system where several more questions are asked: where and with whom the child should live, what services should be provided to the child to help them adjust and address their trauma experience, and what services should be provided to the parents to make it possible to reunify the family in the future. During this time, I have also had the opportunity to observe several hearings that attempt to address these questions. Each hearing includes attorneys that represent the Child Welfare Agency, the minor, and each of the parents. However, unlike other court proceedings, juvenile court is a collaborative process. So, even though the attorneys are advocating for their client's interests, the common goal amongst everyone is family reunification. Because of this, when a family reunifies or a child is permanently placed in a home that is safe and nurturing, it feels like a win for everyone.

This entire experience thus far has been very enlightening and reinforced the notion that the advocacy in these cases is necessary, because it makes such a huge impact in these family's lives. I am excited to continue to learn and grow during these next seven weeks at EBCLO.

Update 2: These past couple of weeks I have had the opportunity to shadow attorneys in their day-to-day work. This has given me a realistic idea of what it entails to be a dependency attorney. Typically, when I think of a law office, I think of a desk job from 9-5 with the occasional court appearance. Dependency strays from this stereotype in that you are almost always doing something different every day. One day you may be in court, the next you may be traveling around to visit the children you represent, and the next day you may be in the office preparing for court or doing administrative tasks. Your schedule can change depending on the status of your clients, or because of the court's schedule, or because a new case came in that requires immediate attention. Due to this ever-changing schedule, it is important to be flexible in this work. It is also important to have open communication with the attorneys around you so that you can work as a cohesive team rather than a disjointed



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office. An example of this occurred this past week when I shadowed an attorney on visits to group homes. The group homes were not local, so required a bit of driving to get to. Because of this, my attorney coordinated with other attorneys in the office to see if they had any children in the area that needed to be checked up on. This coordination saved other attorney's the travel time, as well as allowed my attorney to make her trip to the group homes worthwhile. Now, just because these visits were scheduled does not mean that all of the clients are seen that day. Because these youth are real people with real lives, things come up and schedules change. For example, the first home we arrived at, the children were loading up to go to six flags, so the visits were shorter than anticipated. At another home, we did not get to see one of the kids we had scheduled a visit with, because they did not want to see us. Although it is disappointing when things don't go as planned, it just highlights the fact that this work impacts real lives and thus requires patience, flexibility, and compassion daily.

Update 3: There are only a few weeks left in my internship and it feels like it has flown by! I have had so many opportunities to connect with youth and become invested in their cases these past few weeks. Because of this, the idea of not being able to follow their cases to fruition makes me sad. I have met with a range of kids from infants all the way to teenagers/young adults. My supervisor on these home visits even allowed me to take the lead on a few home visits, which meant that I asked the youth questions to get a sense of how they are doing and if they have any needs that are unmet. I realized that it truly is a talent to try and connect with each one of these kids and make them feel comfortable enough to open-up with you. Each conversation is different and is based on the personality of the child and what they choose to tell you. One topic that seemed to be a common thread among almost all the kids was sports. Unfortunately, I know close to nothing about sports. However, with the help of my supervisor we were often able to break the ice by getting the kids to talk about their favorite teams or, if they played themselves, what their position was. One pair of siblings both played football and we challenged them to race each other down the block to see who was fastest. It is fun little moments like these that make this work so special. I am continually grateful for this experience and all the wonderful children I have met.

Update 4: This week I got to educate youth from a local STRTP about their medical and sexual health rights. For youth in foster care this sort of information is extremely important because they do tend to have more healthcare needs than other children not in foster care due to the trauma they have experienced. The presentation started with general medical information like insurance coverage, when you should attend your appointments, and confidentiality. Then we transitioned to sexual health detailing the different types of birth control, the right to an abortion, healthy and consensual relationships, and lastly resources and ways to report violations of these rights. This information allows youth in the foster care system to be more proactive in their healthcare now, while they have the extra resources and assistance, and ensures that when they reach 18, they are well-equipped to meet their own healthcare needs. Surprisingly, I learned a lot about my own healthcare through this process, which made me wish I had someone presenting this information to me when I was younger. I hope the youth felt the same about the presentation and will be able to look back on this information when they need it.



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Update 5: It has been a week and a half since my last day working at EBCLO and it has given me a lot of time to reflect about the wonderful experiences I had and the wonderful people I met. Every person that works at EBCLO was very welcoming and made the office feel like home. They were willing to assist with questions and provide guidance about the work we had on any given day. They were also open and honest about their own experience working in the dependency field. Even sharing how they made sure that they took care of themselves so that they could be the best version of themselves for their clients. I feel like my time at EBCLO not only allowed me to grow professionally, but also socially. I gained empathy, respect, and interpersonal skills that I will be able to carry with me throughout my career as well as in my daily personal relationships with people. I loved every single one of the children I got the opportunity to work with and only want the best for their futures. I learned to leave judgment at the door, no matter what had brought the child into the foster care system, or how they chose to cope with their trauma. Although it was frustrating at times to sit back and watch children slip back into dis-regulated behavioral patterns, I learned to be a listener, a resource, and an advocate for their needs and best interests.

I was also fortunate to connect with my fellow summer interns. All of us are going to be starting our third year at our respective law schools, so we were able to discuss career goals for the future. All of us have a strong passion for the dependency field and public interest work in general. However, with graduation coming up we all started to realize the reality of what working in public interest post-graduation entails. Public interest is known for being a lower paying field, especially compared to young lawyers going into big law. We all discussed what a disservice this divide in salary provides to clients who need assistance through these non-profit organizations. For dependency, specifically, this typically means that those hired are wealthy and usually white individuals. This is because they can afford to go into the field. For youth in the foster care system, of which black children are disproportionately represented, they often do not have an advocate that looks like them or that they can relate to about their unique struggles. Fortunately for all of us interns, EBCLO is an organization that is keenly aware of this fact and actively work towards lessening the financial burden and seeks to hire more attorneys of color in their office. There are also plenty of organizations, like EJA, that recognize the financial burden and aim to provide young lawyers the opportunity to pursue careers in non-profits across the country. If you want to help support this non-profit work, donate to EJA.