



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Central Virginia Legal Aid Society

Update 1: Hello family and friends,

I know I don't share much on social media these days, but I want to provide an update about my work this summer! Earlier this year, I finished my first year at The University of Virginia School of Law. This summer, I am working with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society (CVLAS) – a non-profit legal organization that provides free legal services to indigent individuals. Before starting my internship, I was selected as an Equal Justice America Fellow. After working remotely to begin the summer, I just finished my first full week at the office. It has been a great experience putting the skills and knowledge I gained in my first year of law school to real cases.

Overall, it has been a busy transition from moving away from home, starting law school, and getting a feel of day-to-day legal practice. This week, I attended court hearings for pending eviction cases, drafted a legal memo on a potential defense a client could raise at trial, drafted a grounds of defense, and summarized recent changes to one section of the Virginia Residential Landlord Tenant Act.

I decided to go to law school because I truly believe that poverty is a severe, pressing issue that exists not only in the United States, but around the world.



Update 2: I took a field trip after work today!

Happy Fourth of July weekend, everyone. I am writing to provide my second EJA Fellow Update as part of my internship with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. In the past two weeks, I have had more opportunities to work directly with clients. Each day, I feel like I am learning more about how legal aid attorneys approach each client's case. Since there is such a large need for legal services for the poor, many individuals are just given advice on where their case stands, and no further action is taken. Other clients are represented for the entirety of their case. In this process, I feel a tension between being happy about being of service to the individuals who do qualify for free legal services and frustrated about not being able to help everyone who may need it.



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Further, it's hard not to feel frustrated when observing our jurisdiction's civil docket. There, plenty of individuals have default judgments entered against them. I wonder how those judgments affect their ability to



find stable housing or even obtain credit to make ends meet. In all, I am thankful I decided to go to law school so I could one day play a role in addressing lack of legal representation and poverty more broadly. I temper this gratitude with a determination that, collectively, there is much more we can do to ensure everyone in this country and around the world can live a life of dignity.

Update 3:

Happy Friday, everyone!

Posting another EJA Fellow Update as part of my summer internship with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. First, I would like to once again emphasize the importance of legal aid lawyers. Per Equal Justice America, 80% of the civil legal needs for those living in poverty are going unmet.

There was a lot of action this week in Albemarle County General District Court. Eviction trials were on Wednesday and docket call was on Thursday. At the trials on Wednesday, the defendants who were at risk of eviction presented their cases. Hearing their stories in the courtroom it is not hard to conclude that, as a moral



matter, these folks should not have been evicted. However, as a legal matter, their stories were not sufficient to protect them from the court entering a judgment against them. Having a lawyer in court can make a world of a difference for individuals at risk of eviction.

In the coming weeks, I hope to continue working with my supervising attorneys on outreach strategies to maximize the number of defendants who have legal representation. I also hope to prepare materials for individuals who may not receive legal counsel so that they may nonetheless know their rights as a tenant under Virginia law.

Update 4: I hope everyone has had a great week!

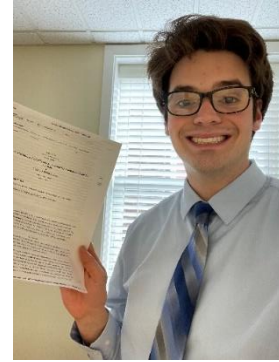
I'm writing my fourth EJA Fellow Update as my internship with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society wraps up. It's a bittersweet feeling because I have really enjoyed my internship experience thus far. This past week I helped more with unemployment insurance cases. Like with housing cases, the means for people to access relief from losing a job is difficult, inefficient, and it's hard to get a clear answer regarding status of benefits. While I have enjoyed my summer working directly with clients, I am also looking at other ways to help people with my law



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degree. My ultimate goal is to have the skills to work directly with clients but also be able to draft model legislation that would transform housing and benefits law.

I'm also working on a research assignment to finish out the summer! In Virginia, tenants have certain protections in the Virginia Code, but it's always great for public interest attorneys to have alternative defenses to rely on just in case. There are simply not enough resources for legal aid lawyers to give each client's case the individualized attention they deserve. I hope the potential defenses I help brainstorm give future clients a more robust defense to protect them from eviction.



Update 5: Hello family and friends,

It has been an eventful summer. I'm excited to share my last EJA Fellow Update with you all. After a long year of academic training, it was refreshing to gain hands-on experience working with clients in a law office. I'm incredibly thankful I was able to spend my summer working with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society (CVLAS) to help provide free legal services to the poor. After the last three months, I would like to share my reflections.

First, there is a great need for civil legal services for the poor. Each week, I attended the first return date in Albemarle General District Court. On the busiest day of the summer, there were around forty eviction cases the court heard. Many defendants did not show up and judgment was entered against them. The individuals who did make an appearance did not have the advice of counsel. Even though retained counsel does not guarantee a favorable outcome, it can make a difference.

Second, moral defenses are not always legal defenses. Over the course of the summer, I was able to observe trials over housing disputes. Many of the individuals representing themselves had lost family members, jobs, and struggled with their health over the last two years. As a result, they fell behind on rent. Under Virginia law, they did not have a defense. Writs of eviction were ordered against these individuals with a short timeline for appeals. If there is a silver lining, is that counsel present to defend tenants made this less likely to happen.

Third, if the United States is going to ever going to eliminate poverty, we must be bold and creative. Over the past year I've reflected often on my motivations for attending law school. I wanted to be a lawyer to try and help people and make the world a better place. If the world were an ideal place, my career path would have been markedly different. No one should have to live in poverty. A life of dignity is something that should be guaranteed by virtue of your humanity. The folks I saw that were evicted should have had homes guaranteed for them. They shouldn't have had to navigate a bureaucratic nightmare to access rent relief. Some of the people that owed thousands of dollars in back rent honestly believed that they had relief coming. The system of processing claims and delaying disbursement seemed inefficient, ineffective, and confusing.



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Side notes on consumer protection: there were people who believed their credit card debt was settled, only to find out that their debt had been sold for pennies on the dollar and now a collector was trying to capitalize on their outstanding debt. I think we need to reimagine our baseline standard of living – one that isn't based on exorbitant individual debt to make ends meet. Public goods that are a baseline for survival should be a guarantee. There's no excuse for otherwise living in the richest country in the history of the world.

I have plenty of more thoughts about thinking of a newer world and I hope to share them as time goes on. Thank you very much for following this part of my journey.

If able, please consider contributing to support future public interest lawyers. Your support can make an incredible difference.

