



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: Hi all! I just started my summer internship with Blue Ridge Legal Services. At the office, the team and I work to provide critical legal services to our community. We serve folks of all different backgrounds and abilities. At Blue Ridge, the clients are so much more than a name on a file folder. It has been incredible to watch and learn from the attorneys here who truly advocate for their clients. Every single client is unique and has their own story. Through their tireless work and demeanor, the legal team has shown me what it really means to be an advocate.

While I haven't spent much time in the office yet, I have already learned an immense amount – from property rights (who would have guessed that a life estate and remainder interest are something applicable post-finals) to community outreach and engagement. I was surprised by how much of the work that we do is about educating the clients on their legal rights. While the client may come in with a specific legal goal, the journey to that point includes a lot of explaining options to clients and their potential benefits/consequences. Translating legal jargon and statutory language to plain English has been a particular challenge for me! However, I think it is incredibly important that people know and understand their legal rights. Onward!

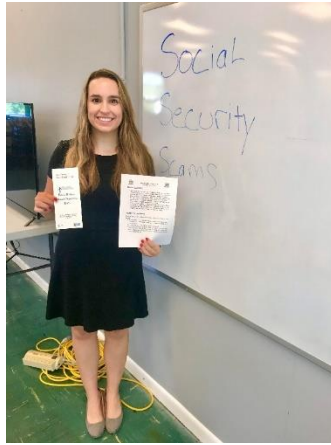


Update 2: Connecting to the community is the key to success! In addition to client meetings and other “typical” lawyer-ing tasks, I had the pleasure to go to a local elderly care facility this week and assist with a presentation about current Social Security scams. I really enjoyed sharing our knowledge to the community and empowering others to take control of their own finances. Unfortunately, social security scams are extremely common and very predatory. Scammers have access to a wide variety of information and can easily trick anyone,



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even the most cautious person. It is incredibly important to protect your personal information but also look out for others who may be vulnerable to scammers.



I truly believe that knowledge and information should be disseminated and shared with the community. Therefore, I really loved this opportunity to connect with local senior citizens and share what we've learned through our work such as typical scam schemes and methods of protection. In addition to sharing our knowledge, I learned a lot from the community members themselves, especially when they shared their own stories of almost being scammed or their concern that they aren't able to trust people who call to "offer help" anymore. While we can't take down every scammer, I am committed to ending financial exploitation and fraud.

Update 3: Hi everyone! I can't believe that I'm about halfway through my internship with Blue Ridge Legal Services! It's been challenging but incredibly rewarding. One of the most important aspects of our job is to make sure our clients are being supported. While we may know that a client is being financially exploited by someone, Adult Protective Services may not know about the current situation. It requires a community to keep one another safe, happy, and healthy.

Last week, I had the opportunity to meet with a multidisciplinary task force regarding elder justice. There were a host of different providers, departments, and organizations at the meeting. Everyone was working together to share information, learn about current issues, and find solutions. I really enjoyed sitting down with the different participants to learn about how they interact with our older adults and their view of the situation. While attorneys can solve problems, we're not able to provide medical attention or protection quite like a doctor or police officer. Having these conversations with different sectors of our community is critical to succeed in truly advocating for our clients.



Update 4: It's definitely been a busy few weeks here at Blue Ridge! I've really enjoyed learning about the different organizations in the local area who can support our clients in additional ways. As a law office, we primarily focus on legal issues but that's not the only challenges the majority of our clients are facing. It's almost impossible to focus on your dispute about rent with your landlord if you're not sure where your next meal will come from. Please read below to see and learn about some of the FANTASTIC local organizations that support our Shenandoah community.



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Mercy House – A nonprofit organization that provides foods, clothes, and shelter to homeless families with dependent children. They also provide services to help overcome the barriers leading to homelessness.

www.themercyhouse.org

Valley Program for Aging Services (VPAS) – A nonprofit organization that works to empower those 60 years or older with the resources and opportunities they need to lead engaged lives. They are the local experts in gaining and support our senior citizens for successful aging in place www.vpas.info

Martha's Meals on Wheels – a nonprofit organization that provides meals to our homebound neighbors or those unable to prepare their meals, regardless of age or income. Since 1973, the organization has been delivering meals Monday through Friday, filling a need within the community, and connecting with those requesting assistance. www.mowstaunton.org



Update 5: I can't believe that my time with Blue Ridge Legal Services has come to an end! Since I have been working remotely for my last week (due to COVID), I have had the opportunity to reflect on my summer experience. First and foremost, I have gained an incredible amount of respect for the people and work at BRLS. The clients and cases are equally complicated – one legal issue always seems to snowball into another. As a law office, we're uniquely positioned where people can share with us openly and honestly about their situation without fearing that we're going to breach their confidentiality. It's been thrilling to learn about new areas of the law and see what might interest me (who knew that I would be invested in consumer finance protection law and predatory loans).

One of the biggest lessons that I learned over this summer is client management. I was very fortunate to have a supervising attorney who took me into all of the client meetings (the good and the difficult). Everyone loves to hear that they're right and they do have a valid legal claim. It becomes a much harder conversation where the client might not have a strong legal case or we don't have the resources to pursue such complex litigation. I appreciated observing how to handle these difficult conversations and managing the client's expectations. It



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really showed me that sometimes the best advocacy doesn't come from the legal realm, but rather self-advocacy and other supporting agencies can come into address that need.

In addition to client management, I honed my legal research skills. While law school is great about teaching you some of the “black letter” law in certain areas, a big part of being an effective lawyer is knowing how to address your client’s specific legal questions/claims in their own context. It is highly unlikely that I am going to read a case from law school with a perfect solution that exactly matches my client’s scenario. It is important to know the right questions to ask (not only your client but also yourself as you delve into the legal libraries) and how to answer those questions through previous case law, statutes, etc. While memorizing legal concepts for an exam is useful, it is much more helpful to apply the general concepts to your research skills so you’re not wasting time.

As I head into my second year of law school, I will keep in mind the clients and their stories as I dredge through the long nights and days of reading and studying. The clients I worked with are incredibly strong and resilient people; they deserve the best legal counsel that I can provide. When you are a lawyer, you’re advocating for your client and their needs – your work matters. Throughout law school it can be so easy to get caught up in the academic nuisances of certain topics, but at the end of the day, I will be working with real people with real issues that I need to help them solve. From my experiences this summer, I will be able to apply the practical knowledge that I gained and stories that I heard to keep me motivated to stay engaged and enhance my legal skills.