



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Central Virginia Legal Aid Society

Update 1: I'm happy to share that I've started a position as a Summer Intern at Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc.! I have also received a fellowship from Equal Justice America, so I will be updating y'all throughout the summer on the work that I am doing.

This summer, I will be working with two absolutely incredible attorneys to help fight for low-income Virginians to have access to affordable housing. Over the last two weeks, I've had the opportunity to do some awesome hands-on work with drafting motions to help folks stay housed, and have become a total sponge soaking up all of the wisdom my supervising attorneys have to share. I have been able to observe them in court multiple times so far, and am already in awe of the incredible work that CVLAS does. I am so excited for all that this summer has in store - stay tuned for my next !

Update 2: I'm now 4 weeks into my internship with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc. and the time has seriously flown by.

Over the last four weeks I have been able to do more hands-on work to fight for low-income Virginians to have access to affordable housing. I have spent a lot of time writing motions to quash evictions, requests for reasonable accommodations, research memos to help bolster the arguments of my supervising attorneys, and settlement agreements. The most recent addition to my workload is working through 600+ closed cases to make a list of dismissed and nonsuited cases that, based on a new law, can now be expunged from clients' records. Doing this will allow CVLAS attorneys to reach out to their old clients and give them the resources they need to remove these cases from their record, making it easier for them to find housing in the future!

Additionally, I have had the chance to test the waters in family law with an incredible family law attorney at CVLAS. I am currently helping with a divorce and will soon be observing a personal protective order case.



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Update 3: Last weeks' slew of Supreme Court Decisions rocked many of us to our core. Personally, with everything feeling quite tumultuous, it's important for me to both rest AND to fight. My wife helped to make sure I rest, with a much needed weekend away camping in the woods with great conversation, lots of games, and no cell phone service.

Now, to fight. More than ever, I am thankful for the legal education I am getting at Washington and Lee University School of Law. I am being equipped with the tools I need to join the fight on the frontlines alongside so many attorneys who are currently pushing onwards in the fight for human rights.

Additionally, I am incredibly thankful to be a part of the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc. team this summer. When any injustice hits our country, it disproportionately impacts those who are living in poverty - especially those who are disabled, trans, queer, or people of color. While need people on the frontlines pushing for our rights to be protected and respected, we also need people with their boots on the ground helping those who are most impacted to stay afloat. That is exactly what CVLAS does. The research I have had the opportunity to conduct and the memos I have had the opportunity to draft for CVLAS have helped real, living, breathing human beings stay housed. So, my message to everyone today is to make sure that when things feel overwhelming and tumultuous - do not give up. Find ways to rest and ways to fight, because you CAN make a difference, and it is worth it.

Update 4: The last two weeks have been a whirlwind. I had the opportunity to attend an awesome training on trauma-informed lawyering. I can't lie, the important topic and the interactive training briefly made me feel like I was back working in college housing - it made me quite nostalgic for my time at Fort Lewis College! Virtually every client that we see at Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc. has experienced some form of trauma, and oftentimes the legal process is re-traumatizing. At the training, we discussed ways to adapt the attorney-client relationship to make space for clients' trauma, provide coping mechanisms, and engage with clients through an anti-racist and anti-biased lens.

This training was very well timed, as I spent the following week interviewing and engaging with clients who have had to re-live aspects of their trauma just to maintain housing or safety from abusers (and in some cases, both). Because of this, the week consisted of many unexpected changes in plans and I got to observe some seriously adaptive lawyering! I am honored to be surrounded by such strong, capable, and flexible attorneys who are not just pushing for our clients to be safe and housed, but who do everything in their power to make this incredibly trying process as easy on our clients as possible.

Lastly, one of our client's childcare plans fell through the morning of trial, and I was able to watch her two young kids with fellow intern David Tisel - who knew our legal pads double as coloring books? Also, to steal a bit of wisdom from David's EJA Fellow Update this week: the fact that legal system requires folks to come in person to proceedings, but does not provide health care, transportation, or other necessary accommodations is



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classist and provides yet another barrier for low income people to access justice. If I've learned anything during this internship, it's that there is so much to fight for!

Update 5: Wow, wow, wow – I cannot believe that my summer with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc. has already come to an end.

I gained so much insight this summer - it is impossible to tie it all up in one short post. But my most important takeaway, and unfortunately the least surprising, is that my perception of the legal system disadvantaging those who need it the most is devastatingly true. The systems of power in this country run so deep and harm so many. I sat in court countless times this summer waiting for CVLAS clients' cases to be called, watching as judges ruled over and over for landlords against unrepresented tenants. Many of these tenants likely had a defense, but could not afford a lawyer. In Virginia, if a tenant loses an unlawful detainer at the General District Court level (which is the lawsuit a landlord brings when they want either possession of their rental property or for the court to order the tenant to pay rent), they often have to post an appeal bond based on their monthly rent to be able to appeal the Court's decision. Tenants who can't afford for a lawyer to build them a strong defense can't afford to appeal to a higher court for another opinion either.

To make matters worse, if a tenant manages to post an appeal bond but loses their appeal, the money is given to the landlord. So, these bonds function much differently than bail in our criminal system (jail and pre-trial detention bail bonds are also incredibly problematic, but that is a conversation for another post). For those criminal bail bonds, if the person who was arrested appears at trial, they get their money back. Many communities organize and maintain bail funds to post bail, and the money then returns to the community fund after trial, allowing them to continue to help others. Because appeal bonds in housing cases go to the landlords if the tenant loses the appeal, such community support isn't available, as the funds would need to be continually refilled. This is a systemic failure, among many others, that can only be countered by people out there doing the important work that I had the opportunity to be a small part of this summer. I cannot wait to spend the rest of my career working alongside the incredible attorneys and communities that are pushing towards a more equitable system.

One final note before I wrap up – there is a new Virginia law that allows dismissed and nonsuited unlawful detainers to be expunged from tenant's records. Throughout the summer I sifted through unlawful detainers CVLAS assisted with over the last several years and compiled a list of 340 cases that are eligible for expungement! The expungement of these cases will make it easier for those tenants to find affordable housing in the future, and I am so happy that I was able to be a small part of that.

I am overwhelmed with gratitude towards CVLAS and all who made this summer possible!