Part 1: Instructional Activity

This summer, I completed my externship at LAF (formerly known as the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago) in the Veterans Rights Project division of the Public Benefits Practice Group. I learned a lot about administrative advocacy, the barriers many veterans face to obtaining the benefits they are promised when they join the military, and did some interesting research on various legal issues affecting veterans.

I continued to hone my research and writing skills during this externship. I came into this internship knowing nothing about Medicaid provisions, veterans' benefits, and Social Security applications, and now I feel comfortable writing and discussing them. I developed screening tools and flyers about VA benefits, the eligibility requirements, and application process that most individuals are unfamiliar with.

My research skills led to finding an updated Navy policy that enables attorneys at LAF to advocate for clients facing barriers to VA benefits. While researching a similar legal issue for one of my supervisor's clients, I discovered an updated Navy policy on considerations of a veteran's mental health for those who have been administratively separated for misconduct.

This policy will enable many veterans suffering from mental health conditions to access veterans' benefits. Most veterans who have been administratively separated for misconduct are barred from obtaining VA benefits. While some veterans separated for misconduct are deservedly prevented from receiving benefits, there are many more veterans who have mental health conditions such as PTSD or TBI which contributes to their misconduct. Many veterans suffering from PTSD especially before 1980 were especially vulnerable to unfair punishment because PTSD was not recognized as a formal diagnosis until that year.

This new policy benefits two groups of service members. First, the service members who are under consideration for separation for misconduct. Second, the veterans who have already been administratively separated for misconduct.

Finding this research was my proudest achievement. First, it was exciting and interesting to come across something I had not expected to find. Second, the advocates at LAF will be able to use this policy when assisting veterans seeking a discharge upgrade or characterization of service review.

One thing I did this summer was Social Security Income/Disability Insurance Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) Training. Through this program, I learned about the common barriers and pitfalls applicants face when applying for entitlements that they are legally entitled to and need for their economic survival. In order to pass the course, I had to draft a Medical Summary Report, which comprised of the client's personal history, medical history, and explanations of how the applicant's disability prevented them from obtaining substantially gainful activity. Not only did I learn more

about Social Security from this training, but I was able to provide resources and suggestions to the attorneys representing clients seeking Social Security benefits.

During the summer, I have had a lot of exposure to administrative advocacy. I did not get a chance to go into the courtroom all summer, and I regret that this did not happen. I also did not have much exposure to the discovery process, motions writing and hearings, oral advocacy, and many other aspects of litigation. While I found some aspects of administrative interesting and I believe that I learned a lot from this experience, I realized that I want to do litigation in a courtroom. I always knew I wanted to do that, but this summer confirmed that courtroom and general litigation, versus administrative advocacy, is what I prefer.

One other thing I realized is the downside of working at a legal nonprofit funded by the Legal Services Corporation. While LSC funding is vital for civil legal aid, it also has strict restrictions against lobbying on behalf of clients to change or improve public policies that impact disadvantaged groups of people. Last summer, I worked for a non-profit that handled civil legal aid cases but also followed and regularly published reports on policy efforts in the state of Illinois. While I realize this is something I will not be able to do straight out of law school, I would eventually like to work for a non-profit that handles impact litigation and advocates for public policy changes that help marginalized communities.

One of the results I am most proud of is that I was able to develop informational and advocacy tools that will be helpful for clients and advocates of veterans here at LAF. There are many benefits that veterans can access but are either unaware that the benefits exist or that they qualify for those benefits. I created tools to be shared with veteran clients at the monthly clinics that will help break down the complicated process of applying for VA benefits.

For example, one benefit that is accessible to nearly all veterans is a benefit called VA Pension. The name of the benefit is misleading, however, because it is a means tested benefit for people with disabilities. Unlike the very strict requirements for qualifying for disability for the Social Security Administration, a veteran can qualify for monthly VA Pension benefits if they are below the federal poverty line and 65 years or older. Thus, many poor elderly veterans are able to access supplemental income even if they don’t have a physical or mental disability. The tool I developed broke down the requirements, the application process, and the benefits veterans would be entitled to.

Overall, this summer taught me a lot about the kinds of public interest areas I am interested in pursuing. I realized that I want to do more courtroom based litigation rather than administrative advocacy. I think I would be open to administrative advocacy through litigation in the courtroom, but the appeals and hearing process of administrative agencies isn’t as appealing to me.

Working for the Veterans Rights Project at LAF taught me a lot. Although I am not sure if I want to pursue veterans benefits law or administrative advocacy, I was able

to hone my skills and learn about an area of law I would not have otherwise learned in law school. Although I’m not entirely sure what areas of civil legal aid I would want to pursue, I believe working at LAF this summer was one step forward in my legal career.