



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: This summer I am thrilled to be working at Lawyers for Children in New York City. Similar to my last organization, LFC provides an interdisciplinary team of social workers and attorneys for each of their clients, who are predominantly children in foster care. I love working with children and direct client work and have been very excited to begin my time at LFC to finally combine these two passions!

In the first two weeks of my internship, I have learned so much already. I have experience working in child advocacy in both Louisiana and Massachusetts, two vastly different systems. Already, I am seeing the ways in which New York varies from each of these systems as well. For instance, New York is immensely concerned with the direct wishes of children, which to me symbolizes a respect for children's rights that is far too often missing in the United States child welfare context. In New York, children may receive a court-appointed attorney in custody, visitation, and guardianship (CVO) cases, and *must* receive an attorney in care and protection cases. LFC represents kids in each of these scenarios, as well as some kids in juvenile delinquency proceedings. Children of New York City are represented by multiple nonprofits that receive state funding to provide Attorneys for the Child. I am inspired by the numerous organizations who dedicate their time and energy solely to supporting children, and not just whatever we assume is in their best interest.

At LFC, I am lucky enough to have a direct supervisor who previously represented parents in family court matters. Her perspective from this experience is helpful, and provides context to understand multiple aspects of each case. In these first two weeks, I have followed her to court nearly every day, either in person or virtually, to watch permanency hearings, trials, conferences, and settlement discussions. I have seen custody cases, care and protection cases, and delinquency cases, and gotten to meet 4 of our incredible clients face-to-face. I love meeting with our clients, understanding their story, and then watching how that translates directly to how we can represent them in court. I notice the jurists' acknowledgment of our clients' perspectives, and watch how their decisions are affected by our positions. Soon, I will be able to go on the record myself and begin to develop the skills I need to represent my own clients next year! I am so excited to see what's to come for the rest of the summer and all that I will learn.



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Update 2: Since my last update, I had my first appearance on the record! For the last few weeks, I have been shadowing my supervisor to Family Court nearly every day, getting used to the various jurists' styles and what to expect at different proceedings. Each case is a little bit different, which keeps things interesting! Finally, it was my turn to speak on the record, meaning I was able to sit with my supervisor and speak directly to the judge to advocate for our clients' position in a custody and visitation case. Leading up to it, I was nervous: I was prepared, but you never truly know what's going to happen at these appearances! My supervisor walked me through it, and I answered the judges' questions and communicated with the other attorneys. I was proud to be able to advocate on behalf of my client, the child, and communicate what he wanted to get across to the judge. Ultimately, the outcome we reached was a compromise, and tomorrow we will contact our client to let them know the update. Speaking with our clients is one of my favorite parts of this experience. Though they might not always be excited to hear our updates, I believe that the way we communicate with our clients about our cases can make a world of difference. I believe there is significant power in affording children the right to have their own voice heard in a proceeding that largely centers around them, and I am grateful to be part of the team that makes it happen. Soon I will have the opportunity to speak on the record a few more times. I'm excited to keep developing this skill and excited to meet the next clients!

Update 3: Today, I did my first cross-examination! Though I was nervous, my supervisor made sure I was well prepared and gave me lots of advice prior to my appearance. I feel so lucky to be getting the opportunity to practice litigation skills so that by the time I have my own caseload, it will be second nature to me (though I'm sure I will still have nerves!). It is also essential that I am able to practice and develop these skills as an intern, as so many legal services organizations are stretched thin and under-resourced. Being able to arrive on the job well-prepared means more time can be devoted to serving clients and the community.

The cross-examination today was what's called an inquest, which means one parent didn't show up for the custody hearing. We still proceed with the hearing, and the parent that did show up typically gets what they asked for. So much emphasis is placed on each party showing up in court on time, rightfully so. However, it does make me pause to reflect on how quickly things can change when you don't show up. In the case today, the party that didn't show up has appeared for all their past court dates. That they didn't show up today was unexpected, and ended up having a significant impact: they completely lost custody of their child. It's of course impossible to say what would have happened if they did show up – I think it's likely the outcome would be the same – but it's hard to ignore all of the possible reasons they didn't show up and how black and white their appearance (or lack thereof) becomes. In few other scenarios in life does absence have such drastic consequences. This is a feature of the US legal system, which views people in a very narrow light, and often overlooks the reality of humanity. While the party that didn't show up did have an attorney, who diligently tried to contact them, it is moments like this in which I am reminded of the true importance of legal representation and having someone there to navigate the process with you.

Update 4: It's hard to believe there are only two weeks left of my internship! It started slowly at first: lots of training, meetings, and so much to learn. Then, all of a sudden, nearly the whole summer had flown by! As I



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pause now, I see how far I have come since that first day: I have done many court appearances, slowly shifting from a strictly scripted one or two sentence report, to a more natural style of anticipating questions and preparing answers in a conversational way. I have done research projects small and large, and sat in on meetings with clients, parents, and other attorneys and social workers. I have seen such a variety of cases and have practiced navigating the case law through different fact patterns.

For the last couple of days, I have been working on a Motion to Dismiss for a Juvenile Delinquency Petition. It's an omnibus motion: we are arguing that the petition should be dismissed for a few different reasons. I have been with this case for a few weeks now: I met the client at the initial client meeting, I appeared in court on her arraignment, and now am preparing her motion to dismiss. Working on this Motion was very motivating to me, and an exciting opportunity to use the skills I learned in school to research case law and synthesize an argument. This is a JD case, and our client is only 16: working on these cases is emotional and difficult, and requires reflection. I can't imagine being involved in the court-system at the age of 16, for which I am grateful. Through working on these cases, I am reminded of the importance of zooming out of each case to realize what it is: no matter the facts, this is a child who has been arrested and needs someone to navigate and advocate for them. It's scary, overwhelming, and can be quite traumatizing for them. I am grateful to be practicing the skills needed to represent young clients in a compassionate, trauma-informed way.

Update 5: I have now concluded my 10-week internship at Lawyers for Children! The weeks absolutely flew by, and I can confidently say that I have learned so much. Recently, a Judge asked me what one thing is that I learned this summer. It's hard to choose just one thing – among many technical skills and knowledge – though one “life lesson” of sorts jumps out. This summer, I came across many cases with similar fact patterns. In the beginning, I realized I was assuming that similar fact patterns meant similar desires from each party. However, it quickly became clear that even with identical facts, our clients and the other parties might have entirely opposite desired outcomes in one case versus the next. This was an important lesson to learn, as it reminded me of the individuality of each client which is at the heart of advocacy and representation.

Throughout the summer, I sat in on at least 5 client interviews - most in person, and some virtual. I spoke on the record many times, including cross-examining a party in a custody trial, representing a client in a juvenile delinquency arraignment, updating the court in permanency hearings and status updates, and conferencing with counsel in settlement discussions. I shadowed my supervisor on countless matters, absorbing advocacy techniques and strategy. I researched and drafted motions, stipulations, and more! Each of these experiences, while similar on paper, left me with myriad lessons and knowledge to take with me into my career. I feel that my experience this summer was instrumental in helping me transition from a law student to a student attorney, and I am more confident in my abilities as I finish up class and clinics this year and enter my career! Thank you from the bottom of my heart to Equal Justice America for helping to make this experience possible for me and fellow students.