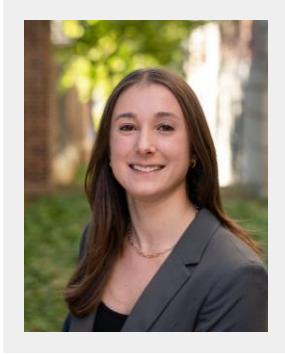




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



Name: Alexandra Kurland

Law School: University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School

Organization: Philadelphia Legal Assistance

Update 1: This summer, I am grateful to receive funding from Equal Justice America to support my work as an intern at Philadelphia Legal Assistance in their Medical-Legal Community Partnership.

The medical-legal community partnership is an innovative model for delivering legal services to the communities that most need them. Philadelphia Legal Assistance attorneys are located at community health centers around the city, partnering with health care providers to address low-income patients' health-harming legal needs.

In the first two weeks of my internship, I have learned so much about how legal advocates can play a role in keeping individuals and families healthy, from helping clients gain and maintain Medicaid to preventing evictions. I have also had the opportunity to shadow PLA attorneys and paralegals and have been inspired by their tenacity, compassion, and drive to secure justice for clients.

As my summer internship continues, I look forward to serving clients under the guidance and supervision of the legal advocates at PLA.

Equal Justice America is a nonprofit that funds law students at legal aid programs throughout the country in order to meet the civil legal needs of low-income Americans.

Update 2: The summer is truly flying by! In this past week, I've had the opportunity to continue shadowing Philadelphia Legal Assistance's amazing attorneys and paralegals while also beginning to work with clients. One kind of issue that PLA's Medical-Legal Community Partnership often handles involves helping clients who are denied access to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) appeal their case.

SSDI is a monthly payment that someone receives because they have a disability expected to last longer than twelve months or end in death. Despite the way that these kinds of benefits are often portrayed in the media,



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there are lots of restrictions that make SSDI difficult for people to access. Applicants need to have enough work history to qualify, cannot earn more than a certain amount of money from work, and have to be considered “disabled” based on the Social Security Administration’s definition. The SSA’s definition of disability can be very different from a client’s own experience of their disability or their medical provider’s understanding of it, and clients are often denied SSDI because they are deemed not sufficiently disabled.

This is one area where legal advocates can make a big impact by helping clients gather and develop medical evidence to support their case, including compiling a client’s medical records and asking for forms and support letters from their providers. By advocating for clients through the SSDI appeal process, civil legal aid providers can help reduce inequity by fighting ableism in our public benefits system. With generous funding from Equal Justice America, I am grateful for the opportunity to support PLA in this work.

Update 3: Working in PLA’s Medical-Legal Community Partnership has opened my eyes to the many nuances of civil legal aid in Philadelphia. One major issue that this internship has brought my attention to is the challenges that people with various immigration statuses face in accessing public benefits and other kinds of much-needed support. Unfortunately, PLA is not allowed to provide legal assistance to undocumented people because it receives federal funding. However, we work with lots of mixed-status families, in which one or more family members have an immigration status that qualifies them for legal aid from PLA.

Determining what kinds of benefits mixed-status families can access can be complicated. For example, SNAP is available not just to citizens, but also certain categories of noncitizens like refugees, asylees, and children who are lawful permanent residents. Undocumented people are never eligible for SNAP, even if they have children who are citizens. However, when these children apply for SNAP, a portion of their undocumented parents’ income is counted in determining how much the children will receive in benefits. These kinds of complexities make it all the more important that mixed-status families can receive guidance from legal advocates like those at PLA. Until our laws reflect the fact that food is a human right that should not be restricted only to people with certain immigration statuses, the work of civil legal aid organizations is invaluable for helping people navigate the challenging web of rules and regulations surrounding SNAP and other public benefits.

Update 4: Interning with PLA’s Medical Legal Community Partnership has given me a firsthand look at the immense value of this innovative legal model. Advocates in the MLCP are able to provide holistic care to their clients, addressing the many legal issues that impact health and well-being.

For example, one client who I assisted came to the MLCP because she needed help appealing an SSDI denial. The appeal process can be labor-intensive, requiring appellants to complete various administrative forms and gather medical records and evidence. The high bar to appealing an SSDI denial can be especially unjust when compounded by its inaccessibility to people with disabilities that might, for example, make it difficult to handwrite answers to many pages of questions. MLCP advocates can leverage not only their experience and knowledge to help clients navigate this process; they can also use their unique position in the healthcare setting to seek out testimony from a client’s physician that might strengthen their appeal.



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While we met with this client, another issue emerged: without SSDI payments, it was difficult for her to afford her utility bills. I was able to help her apply for a program through her utility company that lowers the cost of her bills. Once approved, she would no longer have to worry about keeping her lights on while she awaited the outcome of her SSDI appeal. This is just one example of how the MLCP model meets the legal needs of low-income people in a holistic manner.

Update 5: I have learned so much during my ten weeks with Philadelphia Legal Assistance's Medical Legal Community Partnership. My experience has underscored to me how vital it is for low-income people to be able to access essential resources like healthcare, income, food, and housing in order to lead healthy and fulfilling lives, as well as the role that civil legal aid attorneys and paralegals can play in helping secure this access.

I feel extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to experience the Medical Legal Community Partnership model firsthand. In the MLCP model, legal advocates meet low-income people where they are, in their communities, by providing legal assistance at community health centers and hospitals. At the health center where I spent my summer, located in Northeast Philadelphia, I could see this model's many benefits. Clients could easily come meet with us before or after a doctor's appointment rather than having to potentially take additional time off work, find childcare, and/or pay for transportation in order to get to PLA's main office in Center City. Clients who had issues with medical billing could get assistance from the MLCP, rather than having to navigate the often-convoluted insurance system on their own. We could more effectively advocate for clients who had been denied disability-related benefits by getting supporting documentation from their medical providers, with whom the MLCP has strong working relationships. And doctors, nurses, social workers, and other providers at the health center could refer their patients to the MLCP when those patients were facing challenges accessing housing, food, water, heating, and numerous other holistic components of good health.

In the MLCP, I was also fortunate to work with attorneys and paralegals who are deeply compassionate, fiercely intelligent, and have a strong sense of justice. My supervisor helped me learn not just the substantive components of legal aid, but also modeled how to listen empathetically, treat clients with dignity and compassion, and advocate zealously while also practicing self-care and maintaining healthy professional boundaries to avoid burnout. I am so grateful to be learning these valuable lessons early in my career, and I hope to implement them in my own advocacy.

As I begin my 2L year at Penn Law this fall, I look forward to continuing my work with the MLCP in a pro bono capacity. I am grateful to Equal Justice America and Philadelphia Legal Assistance for this incredible experience and for all of their work to secure equal access to justice for low-income people.