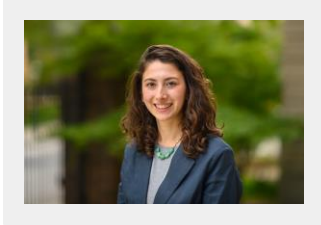




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Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Project: A Medical Legal Partnership

Update 1:

This summer I'm interning with Health, Education and Legal assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership (HELP: MLP). I'm about 3 weeks in and I've already learned so much about the role that legal services can play in addressing social determinants of health. HELP: MLP partners with organizations that employ home-visitation models for people who are pregnant or parenting young children. Home visitors identify unmet legal, social, and financial needs and have a clear referral system to get a case in front of a paralegal or attorney. Many clients have questions about public benefits (SSI, SNAP, or TANF), utilities, and rental housing (both habitability issues and issues making payments), but I have also looked into employment discrimination, family law, and homeownership/tangled title issues.

I'm appreciating the opportunity to learn about new areas of the law and I'm especially loving HELP: MLP's holistic approach to addressing client needs. It is a real shift to be proximate to a diverse set of tools available beyond lawyers' knowledge or capacity; my work feels more effective knowing that a client can access their home visitor with questions about their health or can access funds to meet emergency needs. It's also great to observe a model where lawyers are able to work collaboratively to help with multiple types of legal issues without having to seek a referral for each one. If you're having trouble maintaining employment and can't make your rent, it's likely that you've fallen behind on utilities, too, and it's so wonderful to work with a team that's able to consider the full picture.

Update 2:

Last week at Health, Education and Legal assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership, I shadowed two client calls about the intersection of Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) and child support. In Pennsylvania, TANF the only remaining cash assistance program. The average PA TANF recipient is a family of 3 receiving \$403 per month.

I was surprised to learn that if a non-married custodial parent applies for TANF, they are also required to establish paternity and apply for child support. Rather than receiving child support and TANF, the child



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support payments go to the County Assistance Office (CAO) to partially reimburse the state and federal government for welfare costs. The custodial parent receives a maximum of \$100 (for one child; \$200 for two or more children) as a “pass-through” on top of their TANF benefits. Advocates have argued for expanding these pass-through amounts, because TANF is not enough money for families to live on.

For many people, the prospect of CAO contacting the other parent of their child may be a deterrent to applying for benefits. They may not be on good terms with the baby’s other parent, or they may be a survivor of intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV survivors can be exempted under ‘Good Cause,’ but exceptions can be confusing to navigate (especially if English is not your first language, as was the case for one of our clients) and survivors may not wish to self-identify. In that case, a parent who chooses not to disclose information about the baby’s other parent would then need to give up 25% of their benefits (a sanction) or choose to not apply for cash assistance at all. The complexity of and concerns about these exceptions are why we ended up advising two clients last week.

I’m grateful to learn from HELP: MLP’s advocates as they compassionately aid clients who are navigating systems that are most often complicated, punitive, and invasive. I’m able to do this work this summer because of financial support from Equal Justice America and University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School.

Update 3:

This week at Health, Education and Legal assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership, Philadelphia’s Eviction Diversion Program (EDP) has come up several times. First, there was a New York Times article about EDP that highlights the program as a huge success, while also acknowledging that “Philadelphia’s program does not lower medical costs, raise wages or lower the high cost of housing. But the diversion does offer those who have the possibility of making good on back rent a chance to stay in their homes.” The program slows down the process and sets up a system for negotiation before a landlord files a complaint in court. When something goes wrong for a tenant — a lost job, a surprise medical bill, or another emergency expense — this can work well, and I’ve seen the good it can do firsthand. It’s especially helpful for keeping an eviction off of someone’s record, which can make it harder to find housing later on.

Here’s the article: <https://lnkd.in/gzMhTAss>

Then, at a tenant advocates’ meeting this week, the group discussed one of the programs’ problems: a landlord and tenant go through the diversion program once and reach a resolution that doesn’t end in an eviction filing. This participation in diversion then has no expiration date — once the landlord and tenant have navigated the process, the diversion participation requirement is satisfied. If a rent payment is late months later, then the landlord does not have to engage in diversion again to file an eviction complaint. This time, the process can move much faster.



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The next day, this very scenario happened to my client. We had worked out a solution for her to pay the rent, but because the landlord had already gone through diversion once for a previous late payment, he did not have to wait to file an eviction and did so. Even if a case is ultimately dismissed, this creates a lot of stress for tenants, can saddle them with court fees, and unnecessarily damages their rental history.

EDP is certainly worth celebrating, but tenant protections are only as good as their interpretation and enforcement. Ultimately, Pennsylvania also needs statewide eviction record sealing to limit the long-term damage of these filings. I'm glad to have the opportunity to learn more about EDP and other strategies for eviction prevention at HELP: MLP this summer, and I'm grateful for the support of Equal Justice America and University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School for making this summer possible.

Update 4:

Nearing the end of my summer at Health, Education and Legal assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership, I feel renewed gratitude for their model. I am able to assist with and track the progress of multiple, overlapping legal issues, rather than having to make many referrals without knowing where they will end up. This has been especially helpful with my client who initially was assigned to me to help with a SNAP application. She then moved into her deceased relative's house and quickly had a tangled title and utility debt issue on her hands. I was empowered to assist her with all of the issues that came up around this move, and I had the full context of what was going on in her life. Especially when someone is going to have a new baby for the first time, my clients have expressed gratitude for the additional support they feel having an advocate who can advise to some extent on the multitude of issues that come up when you are low-income. I look forward to spending my final weeks wrapping up these wraparound services!

Update 5:

The most common refrain that I heard from clients at Health, Education and Legal assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership was how passionately they want to be a good parent to their child. They were referred to our legal team because they are running up against barriers that are difficult to surmount alone. They are trying so hard.

Navigating myriad bureaucratic systems that require reams of verification information takes time that people working low-wage jobs or looking after children do not have. I found validation in the work of scholars Jamila Michener, Pamela Herd, Hilary Hoynes, and Donald Moynihan about administrative burden. They write: "For many, the experience of the state is the experience of burdens. People who rely on social welfare programs, from food assistance to the EITC, simply spend more of their lives navigating complicated bureaucracies to meet their basic needs than do those with more resources. Thus, the accumulation of burdens will reinforce inequality to the degree that people systematically experience the same sort of burdens in the administrative venues they are assigned." (See: <https://lnkd.in/ehTqVarD>)



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I spent a lot of time with a client who initially wanted assistance with a SNAP application, but her legal needs quickly expanded. She moved into a deceased relative's house and had to manage utility debt that had accrued in the months preceding her relative's death. She had no vital documents – birth certificate, Social Security card, state ID – which she needed to address the debt. We got her an Uber voucher to come to Center City to submit information for her birth certificate, so that she could get a state ID, but she wasn't able to proceed on the app without verifying her identity with a...state ID.

She made it to Center City, but the Vital Records office is only open for four hours a day, and by the time she made it, it was closed. We went to the Water Department to pay a water bill, but her name wasn't on the bill, so we couldn't get a copy of it to apply for assistance. We went to the Social Security office to submit a copy of her health insurance card to get her social security card, but they no longer take that form of identity verification (even though their website says they do!). At the end of our day, we got a call from the County Assistance Office. Her SNAP dispute had been resolved, and she will receive her benefits this week. Finally, a win.

Our clients find themselves in frustrating, time-consuming, and systemically preventable situations. It has been an honor to work with them – as an advocate, and as a person who, at the very least, can remind my clients that I am on their side.