



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I am fortunate to be working this summer in the public benefits unit at Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. (CLASI) with funding from University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School and Equal Justice America.

CLASI's mission is to combat injustice through creative and persistent civil legal advocacy on behalf of vulnerable and underserved Delawareans. In the public benefits unit, I am learning how to assist clients in accessing benefits including SNAP, Medicaid, Social Security, SSI, and more. The unit works on many cases that intersect with other areas of law including disability rights, family law, elder law, and housing.

On the housing front, I witnessed an exciting piece of legislation being passed in the Delaware General Assembly earlier this week. I traveled to Dover, DE on Tuesday and watched the House of Representatives vote on Senate Substitute 1 for Senate Bill 1 (SS 1 for SB 1) which provides a right to representation for low-income tenants facing eviction. The bill passed in the House and then in the Senate the following day and is now headed to the Governor's desk. Delaware is only the fourth state in the nation to provide a right to representation for renters who face the threat of eviction amidst an acute shortage of affordable housing.

Update 2: As I wrap up another great week at Community Legal Aid Society, Inc., I want to share some statistics about public benefits in this country. (These numbers are from 2021, and you can find this info - and much more - on the U.S. Census Bureau's Interactive Data Tool at [census.gov](https://data.census.gov).)

22.8% of the U.S. population receives Medicaid or CHIP

11.8% of the U.S. population receives SNAP (formerly known as food stamps)

2.6% of the U.S. population receives Supplemental Security Income

There is so much beneath the surface of these numbers. People's benefits are regularly cut off or reduced due to



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administrative errors and procedural confusion. Even when people are getting the correct amount, it's important to remember that help from benefits programs often does not even bring an individual's monthly resources up to the level of the Federal Poverty Line.

It requires persistent advocacy, both on the part of the benefits recipients and their legal representatives, to make the social safety net function in a way that actually provides security for low-income people. And while public benefits are absolutely essential to help people meet their basic needs, their existence does not erase the larger forces that keep high numbers of people in poverty, including structural racism and a severe lack of affordable housing.

Beyond all the technicalities of helping clients to access their benefits, these are the larger lessons I'm learning this summer. Stay tuned for more updates and thanks to Equal Justice America and University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School for supporting my work this summer.

Update 3: For my third update, I want to share what it's like to intern at an organization that engages in both direct services and broader systemic work. One of the best things about being at Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. this summer is that I get to see firsthand how CLASI connects to other organizations doing policy work.

When it comes to individual cases, we can turn to organizations like the National Health Law Program to learn about national trends in Medicaid eligibility cut-offs. That can then help us better understand how an individual client's case connects to those patterns. And on a broader level, organizations like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities release data and reports that are extremely helpful in advocating for policy changes at the state level in Delaware.

All of this helps me remember that individual cases connect to broader patterns. Each time we assist a client, we also assess how their situation connects to the larger landscape of national public benefits work. And this helps us understand which kinds of policy changes could help clients access their benefits more easily.

Thanks to Equal Justice America and University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School for supporting my summer work at CLASI.

Update 4: The past couple weeks at my internship at Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. (CLASI) have been busy and I've continued to learn a ton. Since my last EJA update, I've observed several hearings, represented a client in court, drafted an appellate brief, and worked on multiple research projects.

In big picture news, Delaware officially enacted the right to representation for low-income tenants facing eviction when Governor John Carney signed Senate Bill 1 on July 25. Delaware is only the fourth state in the



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country to pass this type of law. It's been an exciting time to be at CLASI, getting to witness the culmination of several years of organizing and legal advocacy.

I'll have one more update when my internship wraps up next week. Thanks as always to Equal Justice America and University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School for supporting my work this summer.

Update 5: Today I'm sharing some final reflections on my experience as a summer law clerk at Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. in the Public Benefits Unit.

I learned so much throughout the summer, but a few things stand out. First, public benefits law is complex, and the systems that clients must navigate to access basic resources are labyrinthine, slow to move, and can feel like they take away as often as they give. Legal advocates working in this space must know the ins and outs of regulations, administrative policies, how to represent clients at many different types of hearings, and ultimately, how to argue again and again that benefits are absolutely essential to keeping people out of deep poverty.

Second, I understand more deeply than before that it is barely possible to meet one's most basic needs (and certainly impossible to live in safe, well-maintained, affordable housing) while living on Supplemental Security Income (SSI). SSI is a federal benefit that provides \$914 per month to people who are elderly and/or declared disabled (through a lengthy bureaucratic process) by Social Security and do not have a significant work history. Even receiving that \$914 a month relies on neither the recipient nor the Social Security Administration making any errors on the application or renewal paperwork, which can cause severe delays in accessing benefits. The same goes for applications and renewals for SNAP, Medicaid, and other programs.

Finally, working at CLASI showed me the value of being able to simultaneously engage in both direct client work and systemic advocacy. As the only intern in the unit, I got to work closely with three supervising attorneys who were extremely knowledgeable about benefits law, kind and welcoming to me, and modeled the type of creative, persistent advocacy on behalf of clients that I hope to practice.

I'm grateful to CLASI for providing a wonderful work environment, and to Equal Justice America and the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School for providing the funding to my make my summer work possible.

Please consider support EJA so that future law students can provide direct services to low-income clients in need of legal assistance.