

Equal Justice America Fellowship Update

October 5, 2023

As an Equal Justice America fellow this summer, I was placed at Public Counsel's Women and Girls' Project in Los Angeles, CA. I had entered law school with the goal of becoming a lawyer to advocate for women and gender non-conforming people's right to be free of intimate partner violence. Working at Public Counsel was a perfect step towards that goal, and I was excited to learn with the support of Equal Justice America.

I immediately jumped into several ongoing litigations, including a gender-based violence civil suit. The client in this case was suing her abuser for having caused significant interpersonal abuse. However, the case was far from a typical civil suit because the defendant was proceeding pro se and had failed to respond to any of my client's discovery responses for over two years. In this sticky situation, my job was to research a myriad of complex state civil procedure questions, such as how long one had to hold open a deposition when the deponent did not appear to the deposition, what procedural steps had to be satisfied to file a motion to compel discovery responses, and what sanctions could be requested when a defendant refused to respond entirely. In the beginning, I was frustrated that I was devoting a lot of my time to answering very specific procedural questions instead of working on the actual facts of my client's case. However, as I brought this up to my supervisor, I realized that this procedure was the very reason that the lawyers at Public Counsel were here: to guide clients through the difficult legal hurdles that would be impossible to traverse without a lawyer, and certainly without the funds to hire a lawyer. Armed with new purpose, I researched even more questions of civil procedure and successfully helped my supervising attorney revise a discovery plan, attend an informal hearing in front of a judge to resolve the defendant's lack of responses, and drafted a motion to compel discovery responses. I not only gained a lot of valuable litigation experience but came to understand the importance of doing what I called the "boring work" for the success of my clients' cases.

I also had several opportunities to learn about the community lawyering side of the Women and Girls' Project's work. I sat in on multiple coalition meetings where representatives from many different non-profits and public agencies in California discussed ongoing and emerging legislation. Some of the legislation discussed included expansion of pay transparency, expansion of rights of survivors against retaliatory defamation claims, and longer paid leave. For the last issue I also attended a rally where workers and community members spoke about why they needed longer paid leave, which was an incredibly motivating and heartwarming experience. At the tail end of the summer, I was also brought on to work on a class action against agencies that made up the state foster care system. I had the opportunity to learn about the stories of clients who struggled to find adequate housing as foster youth despite the government's duty to provide for them. I collaborated with other interns and our supervising attorneys to strategize on constitutional arguments for our clients, a process that brought the knowledge I learned in constitutional law class into real practice. I learned that working as a public interest lawyer meant that some of your work could be on the community building and legislative/policy aspects and not just confined to taking individual cases. I was excited to realize this possibility for myself in my own practice in the future.

My interactions with clients were limited this summer due to the hybrid work environment, but the interactions I did have were enough to remind me why this work mattered

and how lucky I was to be able to devote myself to public interest this summer. I sat in on phone calls with the client we were bringing the gendered violence civil suit for and was deeply impressed by her unwavering conviction that she did not need monetary compensation or to see her abuser suffer, but she was bringing this suit to remind him that he could not get away with abuse, and that his actions had consequences. She did not seem to care that she may not receive very high damages. Her sense of justice reminded me why I wanted to do this work. Sometimes it was easy to lose myself in the seemingly unsurmountable structures that create gendered violence in the world. But if I could be part of the struggle to show just one more abuser that their behavior was something they needed to be accountable to, and one more survivor the closure that their suffering was not in vain, that was enough to keep me going on this path.

I had an amazing experience this summer as an Equal Justice America fellow. I sharpened my legal skills and knowledge of the litigation process, which I know will serve me well no matter what organization I am part of. I learned the importance of doing the “boring work” that I had previously thought to have little to do with client-centered work, because those boring parts made it possible for clients to proceed through the impossibly difficult legal process. And last but not least, I reaffirmed my commitment to advocating for survivors, especially those who did not have the power or resources to find legal recourse. I am extremely grateful to my Women and Girls’ Project team, who guided me so well throughout the summer. I am also grateful to my clients, who I learned from immensely. And I am grateful to Equal Justice America for the opportunity to have these incredible experiences this summer.

Eugine Choo
UCLA School of Law