



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: Even in my first few weeks at the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP), I've had the opportunity to learn about many aspects of civil rights litigation and legal aid. Everyone at PILP has given me and my fellow interns a warm welcome, and it's been great to get to know some of them in person and over Zoom. In addition to the classic legal intern responsibilities of legal research and writing and some very helpful sessions on prison law basics, I've had the opportunity to attend an oral argument in front of the Third Circuit and sit in on a deposition. Getting to observe different aspects of the litigation process has been fascinating, and I've gotten to witness excellent lawyering in action (both from PILP's staff and from partner organizations).

I've also had several conversations with coworkers about how to best advocate for clients with special needs or interests, which have demonstrated to me just how crucial it is to listen to your client and work to gain their trust and respect. It is a privilege to get to work with and learn from such passionate, talented attorneys and other legal professionals. I plan on soaking up all the lessons I can from them this summer.

Update 2: It's been another busy few weeks at Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP) as the summer continues to fly by. This is a great opportunity to share some exciting news (and brag about the amazing attorneys and staff at PILP with whom I get to work). Last week, PILP succeeded in getting a court to grant a preliminary injunction for our client, Craig Williams, a Muslim man incarcerated at a Pennsylvania state prison, who wanted to be able to buy halal and traditional foods to properly celebrate Eid-al-Adha. For years, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) had allowed incarcerated people to use their own money to purchase religiously appropriate food for communal holiday celebrations. In 2022, the DOC decided to change its policy, prohibiting prisoners from doing so. Mr. Williams, with PILP's aid, sued to reverse the policy change. As a result of the preliminary injunction, Mr. Williams could celebrate Eid-al-Adha, in a way that honors his religious beliefs and traditions. I assisted in researching the implementation of the preliminary injunction and watched it get put into action.



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More than technical skills, I observed how important PILP's work is for helping incarcerated people retain their dignity in such a dehumanizing, cruel environment. For billions of people around the world, religion provides comfort and strength in difficult times, and those in prison are no different. Ensuring freedom of religion in prisons is a crucial civil rights issue, and one I now realize is virtually unknown outside the world of prison law and abolition. If you'd like to read more about the case, you can [here](#).

Update 3: It's been another exciting two weeks at PILP. Two updates to share:

1. In addition to continuing to hone my legal research and writing skills, I've gotten to try my hand at drafting a complaint. PILP often takes on cases from incarcerated people who initially file a complaint pro se (without representation). We are now working to amend what our client wrote in order to make it comply with legal standards and more clearly present the elements of his claims. Working on the complaint has been fascinating because I'm getting to put my lawyering skills to the test. I've realized that one of the most important things a lawyer can be is a good storyteller—how can you best paint the events to demonstrate your client's narrative? It's a big responsibility, but I'm enjoying the opportunity and the challenge.
 2. Today, I returned to Philly to watch one of the PILP attorneys argue in front of the Third Circuit. He did a great job, and I am hopeful that the Court will award our client the relief he deserves. I sat in on a moot for the case earlier this week, which I greatly enjoyed. Hearing the thoughtful questions and suggestions the lawyers assisting with the moot offered taught me a lot about how I can improve my own skills as an oralist.
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Update 4: I can't believe I only have ten days left before the end of my internship at Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP)! In the last two weeks, I've been hard at work on some fascinating and challenging research and motion drafting assignments that I unfortunately can't share too much about. Instead, I'd like to share a brief reflection about something that has been on my mind recently.

If I've learned anything this summer, it is how deliberately dehumanizing incarceration can be. Prison officials control practically every aspect of people's lives—from the time they wake up, to the food they eat, to when they can see or speak to their loved ones. Maybe this seems obvious, but I've gained a better understanding of how taxing that experience can be on the human spirit. It is therefore up to lawyers and others who have direct contact with incarcerated people to make every effort to treat those we encounter with respect and dignity. We must fight for both small and large changes to their conditions that they desire. I am extremely grateful to have gotten to work with the lawyers and staff at PILP this summer, who effectively model how to approach client interactions with compassion.

Update 5: It's hard to believe that my time at the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP) has already come to an end. I am endlessly grateful to the staff at PILP (especially my supervisor, Alex Morgan-Kurtz) for



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welcoming me to the organization and creating such a meaningful and thoughtful experience. I couldn't have asked for a better introduction to the worlds of legal aid and civil rights. I had the opportunity to learn about a variety of subjects and the ways they overlap with prisoners' rights—including religious liberty, access to healthcare, disability justice, and LGBTQ rights—to name just a few. This internship was a very clear example of just how intersectional legal aid is and the importance of taking every opportunity to learn more about different social justice issues in order to be the best advocate for one's clients.

This internship also exposed me to the different types of advocacy work that legal aid attorneys can provide. PILP offers advice to many clients, even those for which they do not file cases. Sometimes a few conversations with an attorney or paralegal can be enough to make a world of difference, especially to someone incarcerated trying to advocate for their rights. This model is, I believe, highly effective because it allows an organization to provide guidance to many people while also ensuring that their longer-term clients receive high-quality representation and enough attention to their cases.

My experience at PILP has affirmed my desire to pursue a career in civil rights litigation. Learning more about the issues that incarcerated individuals face in prisons has only strengthened my desire to protect civil rights and reform the criminal justice system. I enjoyed the variety of subjects I encountered, as well as the creative thinking that goes into crafting strategies for cases. I appreciate that the work involves a mix of investigative research, persuasive writing, and oral advocacy. My time this summer helped me to strengthen both my research and writing skills, and I look forward to applying what I have learned in the future. I feel well-equipped to face whatever challenges and opportunities 2L holds for me.

I continue to be grateful for my funding from Equal Justice America and the University of Virginia School of Law that have helped to make my summer at PILP possible. Please consider donating so that other law students can explore careers in legal aid.