



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1:

I have officially started my third week as a Public Benefits Intern with Legal Aid DC. To say that it has been an eye-opening experience so far is an understatement. Legal Aid DC provides free representation to low-income clients in housing, public benefits, family/domestic violence, reentry, consumer law, and immigration matters. My internship began with three days of orientation. Legal Aid DC gave us an overview of each of their units, the current problems with the system, and how they help their client community. I was disheartened to learn that many of their clients could need assistance in multiple ways. For example, someone needing assistance on a domestic violence issue may also have questions about how that impacts their public benefits. Additionally, I also learned about some of the gaps in the system. For instance, someone may not be able to work due to a medical condition, but not have a condition severe enough to qualify for Social Security Disability Insurance. During my second week of the internship, I attended the D.C. Consortium Consolidated Intern Training. Interns from many D.C. area legal service providers came together to learn about different career paths, how trauma and cultural competencies will impact our work, and the D.C. government. It was a wonderful opportunity to connect with other interns, learn about other organizations in the area, and receive training that will help us throughout our internship.

Update 2:

Over the last two weeks as an intern with the Public Benefits Unit in Legal Aid DC, I have experienced many firsts. I listened to a conversation with a client where an attorney got to tell them that their unemployment case was almost resolved in their favor after several months of relentless advocacy. The client was thankful and optimistic about the result. After that, I drafted my first closing letter to end that attorney-client relationship. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on the joys of being a lawyer while using the knowledge I gained in my legal ethics class last semester. A few days later, I joined an in-person meeting with a client about their Social Security case for the first time. This client asked for assistance with drafting a good cause statement. They were not able to file a request for reconsideration of their application denial



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within the statutory deadline because they were experiencing homelessness and other personal struggles. Within the span of twenty minutes, I watched an attorney draft the statement and close the client's case. Here too, the client was grateful because he felt he was heard. I realized that attorneys do not need months to make a profound difference in a client's life like the unemployment case I worked on earlier in the week. They may only need a few minutes, but unfortunately, that may be more time than many in this community get.

Update 3:

In the last two weeks as an intern with the Public Benefits Unit at Legal Aid DC, I analyzed a prospective client's case for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The client sought services after they were initially denied benefits and Social Security was reconsidering their case. They suffered from multiple mental and physical health problems, which they argued made it difficult for them to work. To review the merits of their claim, I requested all their medical records. I read each page, looking for facts that I could tie to a SSDI listing to challenge their decision. Unfortunately, after reading thousands of pages, I realized that the client did not have a strong case. There was insufficient evidence of her symptoms and their functional impact. From this experience, I learned how important it is to be honest with your care team. Courts rely heavily on objective evidence. Without that, it can be a difficult case to win no matter how deserving the client is of assistance. But I also learned that we can still empower a client even if we need to give them unfavorable news. I can tell them how they can strengthen their case, and hopefully that will increase their chances of success in the future.

Update 4:

It is hard to believe that there are only two weeks left of my internship with the Public Benefits Unit at Legal Aid DC. In the last two weeks, Legal Aid DC gave a tour of D.C. Superior Court to the legal interns. I witnessed my first evidentiary hearing concerning the validity of a prenuptial agreement. The legal question was whether D.C. should honor an agreement from another state. If they did enforce it, the plaintiff would likely become destitute because of the way the assets would be distributed. I enjoyed watching the attorneys for both parties deliver their opening statements and question the witnesses. I realized that I might like arguing in a courtroom one day. We also met with D.C. Superior Court Judge Julie Becker and asked her questions about her career path and how to do well in the courtroom. Our conversation made me fear judges less, so much so that now I am considering the benefits of clerking after law school graduation. I think spending time with a judge, learning how they decide cases, and the workings of a courtroom would make me a better lawyer. For those reasons, I am glad that I decided to intern here because it has exposed me to careers that I have not considered before.

Update 5:

My time with the Public Benefits Unit at Legal Aid DC ended last week. In my last two weeks, I had the opportunity to shadow an attorney's first interactions with a client about their home health aide case. The DC Department of Human Services was trying to cut the number of hours that a personal care attendant was allowed to help a client in their home. I watched as the attorney interviewed the client to determine if their case had merit, helped them file a continuance, and reviewed a retainer agreement with them once Legal Aid decided to provide full representation. I learned about how to manage a client's expectations and set boundaries



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with them during those conversations. I also got to help think about what evidence may be needed to help Legal Aid win the case. Then, I had the opportunity to take the lead on handling my own case. I investigated the facts to determine if a family was eligible for Medicaid and if their benefits were wrongly terminated. I applied what I learned from shadowing Legal Aid's attorneys to communicate with my client effectively. I also received hands-on experience in adding notes to a client's file in Legal Aid's case management system and relaying what I learned to my supervisor. These practical skills I gained will serve me well in future internships and law school clinics. I know how to investigate the facts surrounding legal issues, analyze the merits of a case, and communicate that information to clients in a way that empowers them. Overall, I learned that I loved getting to advocate for others from this experience. Additionally, I know how to present information to my supervising attorney so they can decide on the best course of action. But more importantly, the impact that my presence had on this client community cannot be understated. I was able to work on assignments that allowed Legal Aid to take on more clients than they would have otherwise. I also developed an awareness of the legal issues that low-income DC residents face. Going forward, I can use that knowledge when I am working on issues that affect them.