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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

NAME	Madeleine Yi
LAW SCHOOL	Georgetown Law
ORGANIZATION	Legal Aid DC

Update 1: This summer, I am working with Legal Aid DC this summer as a legal intern in the Public Benefits Unit. As a legal intern, I am helping attorneys communicate with clients, perform legal research, and draft legal documents in cases involving public benefits. Even though I've only been at the organization for two weeks, I have already worked on three separate cases where clients are seeking help to obtain or maintain their Social Security benefits and Medicaid. I have found it both challenging and rewarding to help clients untangle the unnecessarily complicated requirements to obtain even the most basic disability benefits or health insurance. As someone who has only been through one year of law school, it is extremely rewarding and exciting to be able to contribute to real clients' cases, even in the smallest of ways.

In addition, I have learned extensively about Legal Aid DC and direct services work more generally through various trainings, chats with attorneys and other interns, and simply being part of the greater D.C. public interest community. In addition to public benefits, I am learning more about all of the legal services that my organization provides to our clients, including assistance with issues related to family law, housing law, immigration law, criminal record sealing, appellate litigation, and more. Every day, I learn more about the legal issues specific to D.C. and am reminded of how critical this direct services work is to my local community.

Update 2: As the first full month of my internship with Legal Aid DC comes to a close, I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to work with a team of attorneys who are deeply knowledgeable, thoughtful, and passionate about representing clients faced by systemic barriers in DC. In the Public Benefits Unit, I have worked on multiple cases involving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits. In addition to learning about the complicated process to appeal a benefits determination, I have had the opportunity to participate in initial client interviews, conduct medical record collection and review, and conduct research for various client cases.

I have also had the opportunity to observe Legal Aid DC participate in advocacy and policy work. This month, the DC Council is conducting oversight hearings on public benefits enrollment



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in DC. Attorneys from Legal Aid DC, along with representatives from other DC organizations, testify in front of the council to highlight issues and other barriers to enrollment faced by our clients. I feel grateful to be at an organization that works at the intersection of direct services, policy work, and impact litigation.

Update 3: During my internship in the Public Benefits Unit at Legal Aid DC, I am grateful to have the opportunity to gain significant experience working with Social Security disability benefits cases. Over the past few weeks, I have taken the lead on reviewing the case of one particular client whose application for disability benefits was denied. In order to understand the client's case fully, we first conducted a phone interview to discuss the client's medical history. Then, I requested the client's medical records from various DC hospitals, doctors' offices, and mental health providers. Last week, I reviewed hundreds of pages of records closely to better understand the client's condition. Finally, I drafted a memo that outlines potential arguments that we could use to appeal the denial of the client's original disability benefits application. Along the way, I have discussed the case with various Legal Aid DC attorneys, who have offered their insight into what arguments might be most successful on appeal.

I am beyond grateful for the experience of diving deep into one particular client's case. Through this experience, I have learned more deeply about the process of obtaining disability benefits, the daily challenges that our clients face, and how to craft fact-based arguments to advocate for our clients.

Update 4: As I near the end of my internship at Legal Aid DC, I am beginning to reflect on all I've learned this summer. I have greatly enjoyed my time in the Public Benefits Unit, where I've worked on cases involving disability benefits, Medicaid, Home Health Aide benefits, and more.

Most recently, I am assisting a Legal Aid DC attorney prepare a client for an upcoming ALJ hearing to obtain disability benefits. By collecting letters from medical providers, reviewing medical records from various doctors, mental health providers, and hospitals, and preparing the client for oral testimony, we are working on crafting the most effective strategy to advocate for our client before the ALJ. Through working on public benefits cases, I am reminded of the significance of each case that Legal Aid DC takes on, since often, these benefits are literally our clients' main source of income. I am looking forward to continuing to work with this client over the next couple weeks and eventually shadowing the ALJ hearing.

Update 5: I have greatly enjoyed my summer at Legal Aid DC. As an intern in the Public Benefits Unit, I have contributed to more than ten different projects and assisted clients with a wide range of cases. In particular, I have assisted with four Social Security cases, which have allowed me to observe many different stages in the complicated process of appealing disability benefits determinations. I have participated in client interviews, conducted medical records review, assisted with hearing preparation, drafted research memos, and combed through many Social Security regulations to determine how the details of clients' cases affect their benefit eligibility and/or benefit calculation. Through this wide range of assignments, I have been repeatedly surprised at the difficult and outdated process our clients have to navigate to obtain the benefits they deserve. Most importantly, I have gained a deep appreciation for legal services



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work and Legal Aid DC attorneys, who constantly find creative legal solutions to advocate for our clients.

In addition to Social Security cases, I have also gained exposure to DC-specific public benefits and other DC legal issues. For example, I advised a client on how to prepare for an upcoming assessment on the client's eligibility for Home Health Aide benefits, and I conducted research on some of the many nuances of MAGI Medicaid eligibility in DC. I have also had numerous opportunities to visit DC Superior Court, where I shadowed trials and met judges. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to work at an organization that provides a wide range of legal services. In addition to public benefits, Legal Aid DC provides assistance with housing law, immigration, family law, consumer issues, and criminal record sealing, along with impact litigation and local advocacy. Through speaking with attorneys and interns in other units, I have gained exposure to the wide range of legal issues that DC residents face.

Perhaps most importantly, I have had the chance to significantly improve my client communication skills. Through shadowing many client meetings, leading conversations with clients, and drafting written communication with clients, I am learning how to distill complex legal information into key points. I have had many opportunities to practice empathy and listening skills, and I am learning how to meet clients where they are. Through client interactions, I have also learned that legal issues are often intertwined; for example, a client who comes to Legal Aid DC for assistance with a public benefits case may very well also be facing housing insecurity. Overall, I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to tangibly contribute to clients' cases and learn about legal issues in DC more broadly.