



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Bekka Wiedenmeyer
LAW SCHOOL	New York Law School
ORGANIZATION	The Children's Law Center

Update 1: Sharing a brief update now that I have finished my first year at New York Law School!

I decided to go back to school last year to pursue a career in law, focusing primarily on public interest work and providing civil legal representation to New York City residents in need.

This summer, I am working as a legal intern at The Children's Law Center in Brooklyn, New York, supporting attorneys who represent children using an interdisciplinary and trauma-informed approach in custody, visitation, guardianship, paternity, family offense, and related child protective proceedings in the Family Courts and the Integrated Domestic Violence Part of the Supreme Court in the State of New York.

Each day, I am reminded of how imperative it is to advocate for the best interests of our clients, whose families are navigating extremely challenging circumstances in the legal court system. Working with both the trial and appellate/writing units at CLC, some of my responsibilities will include conducting legal research, drafting arguments and affirmations in response to motions, appearing on the record in Family Court, and participating in/conducting client and collateral interviews.

More often than not, the legal system works against individuals with significant economic constraints. As an Equal Justice America Fellow, I firmly believe changing the system starts with raising awareness about the inequality of the status quo, taking action to advocate for community justice, and expanding access and resources for the many, not just the few.

Update 2: Four weeks down, six to go. It feels as if my summer at The Children's Law Center has just started, but there is a lot of important work to do, and the time has been flying by.

A new task I have tackled in the past few weeks has been interviewing clients as we prepare to represent them in court, under the supervision of my incredible mentors at CLC. Lawyering can



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

look a lot different when your client is a child, rather than an adult, but the core values are the same. Our clients absolutely have the right to know what is happening in their case, and as their lawyers (or lawyers-in-training!), it is our responsibility to communicate with them in a child-friendly way so we can accurately represent their position to the judge. Direct representation by an AFC is important, and that starts by making sure our clients are well-informed and prepared for all possible outcomes.

One-way CLC accomplishes this mission is by having an amazing social work team that is always ready to step in at a moment's notice to help identify exactly what it is our clients need, including but not limited to mental health counseling and educational services. I am an advocate of holistic lawyering because it is valuable in helping our clients and their families as they navigate life from the courtroom to the community. I look forward to continuing this partnership in the weeks to come as I learn more about what it means to be an attorney for the child and take on additional case/client responsibilities both inside and outside the courtroom.

Update 3: This past week marks another exciting step in my internship journey at The Children's Law Center as I have finished drafting an affirmation in opposition of a motion filed by one of the parties in a client's case.

The appellate team at CLC collaborates closely with our trial attorneys in drafting legal documents to prepare for fact-finding, oral arguments, and more. Pulling together cases in support of our argument through comprehensive legal research, reviewing internal and Family Court files relating to the matter, and consolidating prior proceedings into a digestible format that is effective in supporting our points are just a few of the key steps in the writing process. One of the most important final steps, however, is editing—and editing and editing and editing!

I am beyond grateful for the mentorship I have been provided at CLC and the thoughtful input our attorneys give to a law student learning the ropes. On that note, I am excited to take on more intensive writing and research assignments as the summer proceeds, as these skills are imperative to a successful legal career.

Update 4: Finding it hard to believe I only have two more weeks as an intern at The Children's Law Center. There is still a lot of work to be done and a lot more to learn, but where better to do that than in the courtroom?

This past week, I had the opportunity to put together cross examination questions for two cases headed to trial as I prepared to handle CX solo for the first time (and of course, with the support and under the supervision of my amazing mentor). Learning to formulate direct questions that elicit a response to strengthen your client's case is a skill that I have observed in different attorneys over the course of this internship, but I have learned two very important things along the way: 1) Each attorney has their own style of crossing witnesses, so finding your own voice is a fundamental step in the learning process, and 2) Not all cases head to trial.

On that note, we settled so no CX for me last week, but I did get to work on a couple settlement proposals! Many cases end in settlement, which is a great resolution for our clients and their



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

families as they transition out of the courtroom and back into their community. Family Court cases can sometimes take years to resolve, which can hugely impact a child's life, so any opportunity we can give our clients to be out of that courtroom sooner rather than later is a win for everyone.

Update 5: I have now finished my internship with The Children's Law Center!

In short, the past 10 weeks have been incredible. Child advocacy in the legal aid process is unquestionably necessary in a city like New York, where there are wide populations of families and individuals who are largely underserved. If I have learned anything this summer, it is that everyone is deserving of a voice, regardless of economic status, age, race, gender, or any other reason that society uses to separate, rather than unite, communities. There is a gaping need for more attorneys in this line of work--and generally speaking, in family law and the broader spectrum of public interest--and my experience at CLC has reaffirmed that this is the field where I want to be in the long term.

While there were many practical skills that I learned this summer on both the trial and appellate side, from drafting legal documents and conducting research to interviewing clients and prepping for trial, one of the most valuable experiences I gained during this internship was simply being in the courtroom every week. Meeting attorneys from different civil legal aid organizations with the same mission as CLC, appearing over and over before the same Family Court Judges who got to know me by name and advise me on how they started their own careers, and interacting with clients from all walks of life really could only have happened in the type of hands-on internship that CLC provides its interns. I am grateful for each of those opportunities and look forward to applying what I have learned not just to this academic year as I head back to New York Law School as a 2L, but to next summer and beyond.

As a final thought, I think one of the best parts of this type of work is the rapport you can establish with your client and their support system. My supervisor always reminded me that a lawyer's top priority is to her client, and I witnessed that in real time this summer as she built bonds of trust with her clients and worked tirelessly to deliver the outcomes they wanted, whether that was going to trial or reaching a settlement. The work is not easy, but it is absolutely worth it if it means at least one child gets to live the life that they deserve.

To continue supporting Equal Justice America in its mission to provide legal aid to those in need, please consider donating.