



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

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ORGANIZATION	Worcester Community Legal Aid

Update 1: I am excited to announce that I have been selected as a summer 2024 Equal Justice America Fellow. With the support of EJA, I will be spending my summer interning with Community Legal Aid of Worcester in their Housing and Homelessness Unit. Unlike in criminal cases, there is no right to legal representation in a civil case. This means that access to our legal system is often limited by a person's finances. Community Legal Aid combats this barrier by providing free civil legal services to low-income residents. The Housing Unit focuses on helping those facing eviction and foreclosure stay in their homes, as well as supporting those experiencing homelessness as they navigate available government programs. My first week with CLA was filled with many hands-on learning opportunities. I sat in on department and client meetings, attended broader CLA training sessions, and dove into a research assignment. I also spent a day in court shadowing several CLA attorneys who volunteered their time with Massachusetts's Lawyer for a Day Program to provide free, on-the-spot legal advice to those heading into court without representation. I am grateful to be a part of an organization that works so hard to make an often intimidating and confusing legal system more accessible to our most vulnerable citizens.

Update 2: The past few weeks at Community Legal Aid of Worcester have really opened my eyes to the struggles people face due to the housing crisis. According to an article by Forbes published in April of this year, Worcester has the 3rd worst rental market in the country. There are simply not enough vacancies to meet demand which is causing rent to exponentially increase. Landlords are pushing long term tenants out because they know they can rent those units out to someone else for hundreds of dollars more per month. Those desperate to find affordable housing are often forced into substandard units. I sat in on a meeting with a client who reported dealing with a bedbug infestation for months. They mentioned they go to bed wearing hoodies drawn tightly closed and long gloves in an attempt to prevent bites. Another case involves a mice infestation that has been going on for years and is causing major health issues, including their young child being taken to the doctor for multiple bites on their body. Mold, broken windows, water damage, and inadequate/no heat are also reported. Changing



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housing is not a realistic option when dealing with such a difficult market. Part of the work CLA does when representing clients during eviction proceedings is to let the clients know their landlords are legally required to maintain a safe and habitable environment. In addition to using these conditions as a defense against eviction, CLA attorneys also advocate to get these issues resolved as quickly as possible. It's disheartening to hear and see these horrible conditions, but it makes the positive impact of CLA's work all the more rewarding.

Update 3: It's hard to believe I'm already halfway through my internship with Community Legal Aid. Since my last update I've participated in a few community outreach events. These are really cool opportunities to meet with potential clients and see the work being done by other organizations in the community. Having various resources available under one roof is vital because, unfortunately, people are usually dealing with multiple hardships at the same time and therefore frequently need to access more than one type of service. These events are especially helpful for our clients who may have trouble traveling due to being low income, disabled, and/or elderly. While my work this summer has focused primarily on eviction defense, it's rarely the only issue our clients are facing. Lots of folks can't pay their rent because they've lost their job or they have a disability that prevents them from working, so on top of fighting to keep their housing they need to navigate the confusing benefits application process. Or maybe they are experiencing domestic violence so they also need to prioritize their safety and the safety of their children. Personally, I think if I was facing just one of those situations it would be enough to completely overwhelm me. I have so much respect for our clients who are dealing with so much all at once and managing to stay on top of everything. I'm also grateful that in addition to community outreach events, CLA has a range of practice areas, from education law to veteran services, which allows us to assist our clients in multiple ways and help lessen their burdens.

Update 4: One of my favorite parts of interning with Community Legal Aid is our weekly lunch and learns. CLA has several different practice areas and each week a few attorneys from a specific practice share their journey to CLA and the work that they do. Before the meetings the attorneys typically give us some articles to read and/or videos to watch that give background and context to their work. This exposes us to areas we may have otherwise never considered or even knew existed. For example, I knew CLA had an immigration unit but I had no idea about the extensive work they do with migrant farm workers. I learned that migrant farmers do not benefit from the same employment and labor laws that regulate other industries. Minimum wage and overtime laws do not apply to this type of work; neither do child labor laws. Migrant farmers are especially susceptible to abuse because complaints about their working conditions and treatment could result in revocation of their work permit. Part of CLA's work here is to combat those abuses and fears. Another area that I knew nothing about is CLA's Family Preservation Program. I was immediately drawn to it once I learned about the work they did. I think most people assume child protective services become involved with families because of serious abuse or neglect and remove children because it is in the child's best interest. While CPS does a lot of good and important work, racial and socioeconomic biases lead to disproportionate involvement with poor and black/brown families. The FPP's focus is to support and advocate for families that have been unfairly targeted by the system. The information I took away from that meeting has stuck with me and has become an area I am incredibly interested in learning more about. The attorneys who host these lunch and learns are open and



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approachable, which makes the legal profession less intimidating. All have shared their personal experience as legal aid attorneys and all of offered to take us to court with them or to attend community outreach events if we are interested in learning more about their practice area. I find the exposure to different practice areas, as well as the opportunity to meet so many staff members one of the most valuable parts of my time with CLA.

Update 5: I recently finished my 10-week internship with Worcester Community Legal Aid. 1L took a lot out of me and I finished my spring semester burnt out and depressed. I went into this internship nervous about how I'd perform, but I'm walking away energized, excited, and confident.

I have nothing but positive things to say about my time with CLA. The organization is incredibly supportive and collaborative. All of the attorneys and paralegals went out of their way to offer help and were more than happy to extend opportunities for hands on experience within their practice area.

My very first day I got to jump right in and sit in on a both hearing and a mediation session. This was extra exciting because I'd never had an opportunity to be in a courtroom before. Luckily, I was able to sit in housing court once a week every week. Every Thursday CLA housing attorneys volunteer with the Lawyer for a day program where they offer free, day of legal advice and representations to pro se folks who qualify for the service. This is something I always looked forward to, in part, because I was impressed with the attorneys thinking on their feet and providing much needed advice to someone they've only known for a handful of minutes. I also took a lot of pride in being part of such an essential program. Studies have concluded that only about 10% of landlords are unrepresented in housing court, compared to approximately 90% of tenants. Landlord tenant law can be confusing, especially when it's not an area you've studied, so LFD works to fill that gap and level the playing field.

Meeting with clients via zoom, in the office, and at their homes was another highlight. After 10 years in Intellectual Property, I really appreciated that personal connection and the ability to see the impact of our work in real time. The personal connections helped to keep things in perspective too. Stable housing is essential to our humanity and affects all other aspects of our lives, and our clients are real people facing imminent homelessness. Knowing that made me want to help as much as possible, which I was able to do in a small way through various research projects that addressed actual issues our clients face.

I could fill pages with all I learned and experienced this summer. My time with CLA reinforced that public interest is my passion and being a public interest attorney is the career for me.