



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: Did you know that 1 in 3 Philadelphians has a criminal record? Old convictions and even non-convictions can stick around on your criminal record and cause lifelong issues in finding employment, gaining housing, accessing services, and more. And, like every other part of the criminal legal system, these consequences disproportionately impact Black people and communities.

That's why I'm SO excited to spend this summer working with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity. PLSE helps low-income Philadelphians clear their criminal records by filing expungement and pardon petitions. Since 2010, PLSE has helped tens of thousands of Philadelphians get a second chance.

I'm also excited for my second summer as an Equal Justice America fellow. EJA provides financial assistance to law students working with organizations that deliver direct legal services to those most in need.

Update 2: I'm four weeks into my internship at Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity and wow, I've learned a lot! I've submitted expungement petitions on behalf of clients whose non-convictions are still visible on their criminal records, and I've started working on a pardon application for a client whose decades-old conviction is keeping him from moving forward.

I've also submitted motions for fee waivers for clients who are seeking pardons.

Fees are imposed at almost every step of the criminal legal process. These range from mandatory fees to fund the court system, to supervision fees for people on probation or parole, to collection fees which are nonsensically tacked on when a defendant is referred to a debt collector for unpaid fees.



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The Pennsylvania Board of Pardons has taken the unfortunate stance of denying pardons to people with outstanding balances. This is yet another way that the criminal legal system punishes poverty. For many of PLSE's clients, fees create a catch-22 — they need a better-paying job to pay off their court costs, but they need to pay off their court costs in order to get a pardon in order to get a better-paying job.

There is a loooooong way to go to make our criminal legal system something that resembles justice, but it gives me hope to be working with an organization that sees how the system punishes those who are already marginalized and works to change the outcomes, both for current clients and by advocating for policy changes that will help people for years to come.

Update 3: My summer with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity is more than half over, and I feel like I'm just beginning to scratch the surface of understanding the criminal legal system.

I've spent most of the last few weeks helping PLSE clients who have received pardons expunge their cases so they can walk away with a clean record (pardoned cases will now be automatically expunged thanks to a new state law, but PLSE is working to close the loop for clients who were pardoned before that law went into effect). I also observed my first Board of Pardons public hearing and staffed a community expungement clinic, where we helped over 150 people register for record clearing services.

I've also been hard at work on my summer research project. I began by looking into a New Mexico law that eliminates fines and fees in the criminal legal system (see my last post on how court costs are yet another way the system punishes poverty). This led me to researching fee reform efforts across the country, which led me to learning that most states' first step toward fee reform is eliminating costs for juvenile defendants. This is a commonsense first step, as kids can't pay court costs and are often punished for their parents' inability to do so.

I began to ask myself how Pennsylvania could move toward eliminating court costs for juveniles. I met with the experts on the subject, Juvenile Law Center, and learned about their debt-free justice campaign. They have been working tirelessly to show state lawmakers that court costs for juveniles are unjust and inefficient. They even have the backing of the Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Fairness, but legislative efforts have stalled for now.

My research will focus on understanding the different paths to eliminating fines and fees for juveniles and identifying what additional data would be useful for advocacy. I am excited to learn more about this extremely important policy area and see how justice-minded organizations like PLSE and JLC can work together to create lasting change.

Update 4: A few weeks ago, I wrote about the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons' policy of denying pardons to people with outstanding fines and fees. This is yet another way that the criminal legal system punishes poverty and, like so many other parts of the system, it disproportionately impacts Black people.



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As part of my internship with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, I have been helping clients who can't afford to pay their court costs file motions for fee waivers. Last week, I was able to stand up in court and represent two clients in their motions — and both won!

Our clients still have a long way to go in the pardon process, but when you are living on a fixed income or supporting multiple dependents, having one less thing to worry about is no small victory. And for me as a law student, helping clients move toward their goals is an immeasurable reward of its own.

Update 5: I wrapped up my summer internship with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity this week, and I couldn't be happier with my experience. I filed more than 80 expungement petitions, represented clients in court for the first time, helped someone through the process of applying for a pardon, collaborated with like-minded organizations working to change the criminal legal system at the statewide level, and learned a LOT.

There was a poster next to the desk I worked at most of the summer with Mariame Kaba's wise words on it: "Hope is a discipline." There are many parts to the discipline of hope; two in particular come to mind as I reflect on the past ten weeks.

The first is taking care of ourselves and each other so we can stay hopeful. The staff at PLSE exemplifies what it means to work together. I am blown away by the sheer volume of knowledge that my colleagues hold and their constant willingness to share that knowledge to ease each other's burdens. So much of being a public interest law student is figuring out how to balance the desire to do good work with the need to take care of yourself so you can keep doing that work. I feel especially lucky to have found an organization that makes the work feel exciting, fulfilling, *and* sustainable.

The second is understanding where we are going, even if we can't see it from where we stand. PLSE's focus is on helping people clear their records after interacting with the criminal legal system, but my colleagues recognize that the ultimate goal is a world that doesn't hide its failure by locking human beings in cages in the first place. PLSE collaborates with other legal aid and justice-minded organizations to find creative solutions and advocate for policies that will lead to better outcomes not just for our clients, but for all people.

I am a better advocate for all I've learned this summer, and I am excited to carry these lessons with me into my final year of law school. All my gratitude to Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, Equal Justice America, and every person and organization practicing the discipline of hope for a better world.