

September 18, 2024

Equal Justice America  
3007 East Boundary Terrace  
Suite 201  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Equal Justice America,

This summer I had the privilege of interning at Philadelphia Legal Assistance (PLA) in the Unemployment Compensation Unit. This opportunity introduced me to the world of administrative law, afforded me my first courtroom experiences in my career, and strengthened my writing and client interviewing skills.

PLA's Unemployment Compensation Unit was developed to assist clients in navigating the Pennsylvania unemployment system. Like many government benefit programs, PA Unemployment is certainly built to keep clients out of accessing their benefits. The Unemployment Unit works to help clients at each phase of the process, whether it's the initial application, questions about navigating the online portal, an appeal hearing, or an appellate brief. This summer, I was able to work with clients at each of these phases.

There are a number of reasons why someone may be denied unemployment- it could be misunderstanding the very vague questions on the application, being terminated for a mental health-related outburst, or the employer alleging a policy violation.

Throughout the summer I was lead counsel on five cases. I represented clients at three administrative hearings and submitted two appellate briefs. Unemployment hearings were truly like the wild west. Some hearings, the employer would not appear and the client would win on default. Whereas in other hearings, employers would appear with multiple witnesses and pieces of evidence. There was no way of knowing ahead of time who would be present at the hearing, so as an advocate, I truly needed to be prepared for anything.

Throughout my time, I was able to argue that people struggling with mania due to bi-polar disorder do not act willfully and therefore should be entitled to benefits, people struggling with depression are facing real health concerns, and for the rights of under-resourced, special education teachers. Since nearly everyone that loses their job has an income of zero, the client base was very wide and diverse. The clients ranged from home health-aid, managers at grocery stores, and college administrators.

These experiences this summer have truly been rewarding and enriching. The skills I have gained have set me up this semester to handle more trial work and have opened me up into

considering labor and employment law. Interning at PLA re-affirmed that I want to pursue a career in legal aid and continue to represent every-day community members. I am extremely grateful for the financial support from EJA, as this formative experience would not have been possible without the summer fellowship grant.

Sincerely,  
Jacqueline McCann  
Temple University Beasley School of Law Class of 2025