



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: I am excited to announce that my work this summer is being supported by Equal Justice America, an organization that supports students and legal professionals working in civil legal aid. As an EJA Fellow, I will be documenting my work as a legal intern at Community Legal Services through periodic updates.

In my first few weeks at CLS, I have had the opportunity to learn about the Social Security Administration, the Supplemental Security Income system, and how to advocate for clients and for systemic reform. Through trainings, I have gotten a glimpse into how the system works for children, immigrant communities, and adults with disabilities. I have also gotten the opportunity to write documents for SSI hearings and assist on cases at various stages of the SSI determination process.

I had the opportunity to tour Chinatown with CLS coworkers and Asian Americans United to learn about the cultural life of Chinatown and the anti-displacement work residents and AAU does. It was a great opportunity to learn how to support the community in their advocacy efforts.

I look forward to continuing my work with CLS this summer!

Update 2: As I'm wrapping up my fifth week at Community Legal Services, it's time for my second Equal Justice America fellow update. These last couple weeks, I've gotten to assist in cases at multiple stages in the SSI application process, from initial applications to federal court. I also had the opportunity to sit in on my first SSI hearing this past week. It has been a great experience learning about different forms of advocacy we can do for clients.

Today we went on a bus tour of North Philadelphia organized by CLS, where we heard about the amazing work done by Project HOME, Project SHARE, Norris Square Neighborhood Project, and Chinatown Clinic at Church of the Holy Redeemer. Visiting these organizations and the



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communities they serve was an insightful experience. Below are some photos from Las Parcelas Community Garden and Open Kitchen Sculpture Garden. I look forward to continuing my time with CLS.



Update 3: The last couple weeks I have been doing work for a couple of SSI hearings. Hearings are the third step in the SSI application process. Most applicants are denied SSI benefits in the initial and reconsideration stages (the first two steps). If an applicant is denied at both stages, they have the opportunity to present their case in front of an Administrative Law Judge. To assist in these hearings, I have done record reviews of clients' medical and other evidence, and have drafted a prehearing statement explaining why the ALJ should find that our client is disabled. One of these hearings was this week, and I sat in on both the hearing prep and the hearing itself. It was a great opportunity to see the work done on a case culminate into representing the client at their hearing.

In addition to direct service work, Community Legal Services does advocacy work to improve the SSI system. I had the opportunity to attend an advocacy meeting between Pennsylvania's Bureau of Disability Determination and other Pennsylvania SSI advocates. It was great to see how direct service work can inform policy reform. One issue I've learned about this summer was SSA's response to long COVID SSI cases. Although SSA issued an emergency message on how long COVID should be evaluated, these cases have been difficult to win. It has been interesting learn about CLS's advocacy efforts in helping individuals with long COVID apply for SSI benefits. I'm looking forward to the final few weeks of my internship!

Update 4: Over the last two weeks at Community Legal Services, I have worked on projects aimed at advocating for clients at different stages of the SSI application process. When an individual initially applies for SSI, they will often be scheduled for a consultative exam, an appointment scheduled with a doctor who works with SSA. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for these exams to weaken a client's application. These doctors only examine the client once and thus often cannot speak to the full extent of a client's disability. I've been reviewing clients' medical records to look for evidence that already establishes the information a consultative



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exam would provide. We then use this evidence to advocate for a consultative exam not being necessary to decide the client's case.

At the hearing level, I led a hearing prep for one client, where I asked questions to help her prepare for what she may be asked by the ALJ. This was a great opportunity to apply the skills I've observed CLS attorneys use in their own hearing preps.

I also worked on two projects aimed at gathering information for future systemic advocacy. The first was a memo discussing potential impacts the Supreme Court's decision to overrule Chevron could have on the SSI system. For the second, I compiled data CLS has collected of SSA approval rates for different types of benefits to track any trends that should be addressed.

Update 5: Now that my summer internship with Community Legal Services has ended, it's time for my final Equal Justice America fellow update.

This summer, I had the opportunity to work on direct services and systemic advocacy projects. This work has allowed me to contribute to advocating for people with disabilities at every stage of the Supplemental Security Income application process, from initiating an application to appealing an unfavorable decision to federal district court. Some of my work included reviewing client's medical records for evidence that could help their case, drafting prehearing statements, and analyzing ALJ decisions for arguments to bring up on appeal. On a systemic level, I observed meetings between CLS and other advocates and agency officials, compiled data on trends in SSI application approval rates, and assisted in editing medical forms to send to SSA for potential use in child disability cases.

I'm grateful for all the opportunities I had this summer and the skills I've gained that I will take with me in future endeavors. I'd like to thank everyone at CLS, especially Mark Maher, for making this summer such a valuable experience.