



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: While it has only been a week and a half since I started at the Legal Aid Society, I can already see how much I admire the organization and its vision for change. As an urban studies major in college, I learned the importance of building and sustaining communities on a local level. While statewide and national movements are important, it is interactions with one's immediate environment that most profoundly affect one's lived experience; it is therefore crucial not to neglect local issues. This goes for politics as well as for law.

Indeed, the aspect of impact litigation that has always most concerned me is the strategy's potential disconnect from the communities purportedly being served. That Legal Aid focuses its strategic litigation on issues that are affecting Legal Aid clients is a powerful and effective model. Strategies for intervention are developed based on what public defenders, organizers, and clients observe. Already in my time here, it has been fascinating to watch that process in action. One of the initiatives the Special Litigation Unit has implemented is a rotating dialogue series with Legal Aid's public defenders in each of the five boroughs. I will be attending the Staten Island dialogue in a few weeks, and I look forward to seeing how that session shapes SLU's strategies going forward.

Update 2: Four weeks into my internship at Legal Aid, I am grateful to get to engage in such meaningful legal work, but I am also deeply appreciative of all the thoughtful and enriching programming that they offer that is helping to enhance my understanding of what it means to be a public interest lawyer.

For example, earlier this week, we had a brownbag session on abolition and how it fits into the work Legal Aid does (both as an organization and within the Special Litigation Unit). It was interesting to hear various lawyers share their perspectives and led to a fascinating discussion about values and driving forces behind becoming public interest lawyers.



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We also had a session with an attorney from Legal Aid's Digital Forensics Unit, which was very thought-provoking. We heard about surveillance methods employed by the NYPD, how the DFU protects New Yorkers from intrusions into their privacy, and how the DFU aids Legal Aid's public defenders in the fight for their clients' civil rights. This, too, helped paint a fuller picture of the holistic work that Legal Aid does to serve their clients. I am grateful to have learned more about all the phenomenal work Legal Aid does.

Update 3: Unfortunately, I don't have much of an update this week. I took off the second half of last week for a family wedding and I've been home sick this week with COVID. I will hopefully have more exciting news to report next time.

Update 4: I have been reflecting this week on the idea of direct services versus law reform. We also had a brownbag session earlier today in which we discussed career paths to law reform. The panel consisted of attorneys who started in a law reform role right after law school, ones who spent a few years at law firms, and ones who spent time doing direct services—either in public defense or civil legal aid. Those who started in direct services expressed frustration with the inability to change the conditions of the systems causing their clients harm, which is why they all turned to law reform. Although I don't have much experience working in direct services, this notion resonated with me.

I appreciate that Legal Aid still gives their attorneys the opportunity to engage in direct client advocacy still. I didn't really recognize until today how relatively rare that is. I am grateful to have had the opportunity this summer to work with our Cop Accountability Project to help clients draft CCRB complaints and with property retrieval. It certainly helps to contextualize why litigation is necessary. Overall, it's been very interesting doing a mix of legal research assignments for contemplated litigation with the direct client work.

Update 5: It's hard to believe that my summer with Legal Aid has already come to an end. I loved being a part of the Special Litigation Unit team and a part of Legal Aid more broadly. I have admired this organization for so long, and it was very exciting to get to experience the impact of its work up close. Legal Aid/SLU's model of change and connection to the communities served is something that I appreciate and believe should be emulated more broadly.

I had the opportunity to work on a broad range of issues affecting New Yorkers—from police accountability to conditions of confinement to expungement, it was fascinating to see the way the city's systems and services work (or don't). I am grateful to have gotten to work on a variety of projects as well, including some active litigation matters and direct client advocacy. Specifically, I helped a number of individuals with property retrieval after arrest and assisted with drafting CCRB complaints for several clients. Getting to do client work was a welcome complement to the legal research I conducted and helped remind me of why doing this work is so important.

I also really enjoyed the brown bag discussions. The topics were well chosen and curated. Getting to learn more about the work that Legal Aid does was fascinating, and those sessions to



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many thought-provoking conversations with my fellow interns and colleagues. These sessions certainly enhanced my summer.

Mostly, though, I am grateful for the people I met and worked with at Legal Aid—attorneys, other staff, and interns alike. It can be hard and isolating to be a public interest student in law school, so I really appreciated being surrounded by passionate, driven, and brilliant like-minded people. I know that I will stay in touch with many of these individuals and look forward to seeing what they do in their future careers.

Finally, I am grateful for my funding from Equal Justice America and the University of Virginia School of Law that helped to make my summer at Legal Aid (as well as last summer at PILP) possible.