



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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LAW SCHOOL	William & Mary Law School
ORGANIZATION	Legal Aid Justice Center

Update 1: During my first few weeks at the Legal Aid Justice Center, I have had the opportunity to work with individuals and on a larger, systemic level. As we plan initiatives for the future, much of our work has to do with learning from the community. This means that members of our team are tasked with connecting with community members and building trust with those local leaders so that when they need help, they know to whom they may reach out. This has been really cool to see as someone who has worked exclusively with legal tasks in past internships. It reminds me that the law is just one facet of aid—that it's a construct we engage with because we want to help people, but it's not the end-all, be-all of what people need to thrive. In other words, legal help is part of a larger network that ties people together. It is an important part, but decentralizing that part through learning from my teammates at LAJC has allowed me to see our impact and the future of Virginia community needs.

Update 2: The second segment of my time at the Legal Aid Justice Center has been busier and learn-ier. I have learned that different lawyers approach problem solving differently. I have learned that there are multiple right ways to do things--or, perhaps, no right ways at all. I have learned that asking questions when you need to is not a sign of being behind. I have learned that all kinds of people are drawn to legal aid and public service work. I have learned that disagreement about goals and steps is healthy and can produce more effective results. Working with people from different backgrounds and kind of experiences can be a learning experience, too. An important goal at the Legal Aid Justice Center is community organizing, so that our legal work starts where people express that they have need in their community. This forces us as people on the legal side of things to pause and question our experiences and assumptions about what is best and what would be most helpful to the communities we are serving. The most valuable thing I am learning is how to listen and how to turn that listening into progress.



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Update 3: I'm working on a couple of cases these last few weeks that have highlighted the high tension between government resources and community needs. Like with any legal case, or any disagreement, digging deeper into the context makes things more complex and nuanced. It may seem--and often does, to me, at first glance--like schools purposely or negligently deprive disabled students of what they need to flourish in school. An individual student may have a need for their IEP that has little to no impact on the school's functioning or the classroom's performance as a whole, and the school will still deprive the student of that thing or accommodation. A closer look, though, often reveals that the reason behind the deprivation is a lack of resources. It may be ideal for a student to have a one-on-one assistant to keep them on track, but that's a part- or full-time position the school has to fund. Children on the spectrum often benefit from having a separate, individualized space to calm down in, but this is a space that could be used for any number of the unlimited needs a functioning school has, and taking care of a child separately from other children requires staff. Et cetera. This is why organizations like the Legal Aid Justice Center can be especially worthwhile: we can see the individual needs through direct representation and then advocate for policy changes that will actually help, like, on a simplistic level, providing more funding to schools.

Update 4: This past week, we went to a youth detention center to give a Know Your Rights presentation. It was a clean, well-organized place, with colorful murals and friendly staff. But that did not mask the inadequacies of the system. As we presented to the kids about the juvenile legal system and asked them what they were interested in changing about it, their eyes lit up to hear information about the kinds of circumstances they faced. They immediately had questions--many questions--that their lawyers, likely appointed, had not had time to answer for them. They wanted to know what their futures looked like; some learned for the first time what rights were being taken away from them in the future. I left with a sense of the endlessness of our work, like the allegory of the person throwing the sea stars back into the ocean. But I also left with the feeling of hope that comes from working with and for members of our community who, despite their past, have strength, courage, and the possibility of a bright future.

Update 5: My experience at the Legal Aid Justice Center taught me a great deal about the community organizing side of legal justice work. I remember in particular a tabling event that a company sponsored at the YMCA for various aid/community benefit-type organizations to advertise to members of the community. They told us interns ahead of time that they were tabling there and asked if anyone wanted to take part; I did not want to take part, since it would be on a Saturday, and that was outside the hours I was interested in working. However, I was curious, and I signed up anyway. It was a wonderful experience; I got to know one of the community organizers at LAJC and chat with families who were milling around, having a good time at the event. We learned from those who stopped at our table what kinds of improvements



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they felt were most needed at their public schools, and both kids and adults participated in conversations with us about much-needed updates and funding. We spoke with members of other organizations about their work. In all, it was profound to step outside the office environment a legal intern often finds themselves in and get to know the other kinds of work that make the office work possible and useful.