EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

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Final Reflection: At the end of this summer, more than anything, I am impressed by the resilience of the clients that I worked with. Many of the clients coming to the consumer law unit had been financially mistreated. Some had been scammed into losing their houses; others had been given predatory loans, designed to fail and strip them of their assets in the process. Time and time again, I was impressed by the calm and determination that clients brought to their situations. I met more than one person that was facing down the possibility that their long-time family home would be unjustly taken from them, but they faced the issue and saw it through strategically and carefully, despite what they were feeling.

The other striking thing I learned over the summer is the great deal of damage that can be caused by using antiquated and inaccessible language in our legal and dispute resolution systems. I watched so many hearings where the complications were not because of difficult legal or financial concepts, but rather because of the abstract and obtuse language and procedures used for everything from scheduling to argument. Outside the court context, these difficult legal terms also permeate complex transactions, creating opportunities for more legally sophisticated actors to take advantage. Using complex language and obtuse procedures is not just a stylistic choice of the legal profession—it is contributing to significant harm and inequality.

The lawyers at Legal Aid were models of the value that a lawyer can bring to a client faced with a thorny legal issue. They were interpreters when the legal language was inaccessible. They were guides when the path forward was unclear. They were storytellers when their clients were unsure of how to present their side of things. While it was gratifying to see how much good the lawyers could do in those roles, it was also frustrating that economic and legal systems had been set up in a way that made lawyers such a necessary part of the process. I learned a lot from working with such talented lawyers and I also hope that someday our legal systems are improved so there is less pressing need of their services.