



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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ORGANIZATION	Legal Aid Justice Center

Final Reflection:

This summer, thanks to the support of Equal Justice America, I had the unique opportunity and privilege to serve as a summer legal intern at Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) in Virginia. At LAJC, I worked with community members and clients whose children, who ranged from elementary school to high school-age, were facing barriers to accessing a public education. In addition, I worked independently to dive deep into the legislative ways in which states across the country have been successful in downsizing juvenile correctional facilities and prioritizing rehabilitative models for justice. Moreover, when attorneys from across the Commonwealth were finding that Virginia's sole youth prison was standing in the way of them accessing their clients, I drafted a letter to the Department of Juvenile Justice advocating for the rights of our incarcerated clients, and supported my written advocacy with cases, statutes, and regulations that I located through intensive research.

Above all, one assignment was especially meaningful. About mid-way through my summer internship, I was assigned to take the lead on representing a parent in an upcoming special education mediation. Prior to the summer, I had no experience dealing with special education, let alone special education law. But my supervisors, team, and client put their trust in me to become an expert on the case, which had been ongoing for over two years, and put our collective best foot forward in mediation.

For context, I am passionate about youth justice law for one central reason: I want to help children, especially those who are particularly at-risk, avoid traumatic experiences at all costs. For me, this might take the shape of advocating for children to remain with their families and be kept out of the child welfare system. It might take the shape of acting as a public defender for young people in delinquency hearings. And it might take the shape, as it did this summer, of advocating



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for children with disabilities to be provided the accommodations they need to go to school in their least restrictive environment.

The mediation to which I was assigned was directly on point to what drove me to youth justice law in the first place. Following several instances of physical restraint and seclusion, my client's child had been traumatized and, as a result of that trauma, denied access to his least restrictive environment. I struggled reading the facts of that case. This kid was young and already his school system had failed him, in a way that had the potential to impact him for the rest of his life. But my client, his mother, was a complete and total force of nature. She had been advocating for him tirelessly from the beginning; before she had the help of lawyers, she was doing the work herself to learn the law, stand up in IEP meetings, and not take no for an answer. When she did begin to seek legal help, she did not slow down. With the advice and assistance of attorneys, she worked hard to learn the law better. She asked questions, provided answers, and worked with us as a thought partner in what was possible for her child. She taught me more than I ever expected to know about special education and, more importantly, what it looks like to be the best, zealous advocate for your kid that you can be. I am confident that I will remember her and appreciate her for that for the rest of my career.

In mediation, myself and my supervisor negotiated to secure our client the best agreement we could have possibly hoped for. While I had to end my internship before we were able to finalize it, my client made her gratitude and respect for my work very known. In a breakout session during mediation, my supervisor informed our client that it was my first time in mediation, and that I had known next to nothing about special education prior to the summer, to which my client paused, with a shocked expression on her face, and said, "Sarah, you are doing what you are meant to be doing." I have had few moments in my career so far as gratifying as that.

All in all, my summer with LAJC cemented that I am on the right path in law school and life, and I plan to continue following what drives me. I am incredibly appreciative of Equal Justice America for its financial support this summer; I know this work is impossible for many law students like me without help from organizations like yours.