EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

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ORGANIZATION	Legal Services of Northern Virginia

Final Reflection:

My experience at Legal Services of Northern Virginia was a mixed bag. For much of the summer, I carried frustrations about how the nonprofit conducted its operations. It left me with the question—how can legal aid become more effective to bridge the Justice Gap?

Before going to law school, I talked with a lawyer involved with CLOC, the Corporate Legal Operations Consortium. Aware of the Justice Gap in civil legal aid, he posed the following question: Can the 90% gap in low-income civil legal needs that go unaddressed be bridged by funneling more funds and attracting more talented attorneys to legal aid, or does something else need to change? Having served as the Director of Operations of a start-up nonprofit, I recognized that organizations always have room to improve business operations. Nonprofits in particular often have lower levels of efficacy when mission-driven people skip the steps it takes to learn strategy and adopt the mindset of continuously learning to improve their operations. There is a need for legal aid organizations to become more operationally efficient and not just seek more funds and people.

In my last lunch with staff attorneys at my office, my supervisors shared similar sentiments. They have some colleagues they think work too much, but also some they feel like hardly don't work as hard as they should but are kept around the organization. The staff also expressed disconnects in training of the intake staff and communications between intake staff and attorneys that has led to potential clients being treated disrespectfully and turned away when in their traumatic situations. They also expressed frustrations with some colleagues who are managers in the organization but seem to lack basic abilities to work effectively with others with poor communication skills and ineffective leadership.

While there is a need for more funds in legal aid and more funds could attract the better people to improve organizations, I find that legal aid organizations should earn it first. Legal aid organizations should seek to hire business-minded directors who have experience or skills in growing and maintaining organizations to restructure systems and workflows and improve the quality of the workplace culture for their employees which trickles down to their clients. Legal aid organizations should be willing to make difficult decisions to rehire attorneys in positions if staff are mutually not a good fit, instead of being complacent and letting bad hiring decisions lead to worse organizational health. Legal aid executives need to become bolder in how they approach their mission—not to fundraise and report impact figures for the sake of growing but intentionally striving to improve their organizational health.

My experience left me with this hope for the legal aid sector—to strive to improve organizational health and trigger a virtuous cycle. I hope that organizations will take steps that improve their employee's experience, leading to better quality of services with clients, better outcomes and impact, more funding, recruitment of more capable and passionate attorneys, and a real impact on the Justice Gap.