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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: Thus far, my summer has consisted of more client interaction than I could have expected! I'm currently in my third week (second full week) and have been in courthouses three different times, with my fourth happening tomorrow. This form of engagement has really already demonstrated how much legal service/legal aid attorneys do.

My courthouse time has been in connection with Lawyer for the Day Clinics held in different counties in Massachusetts, particularly dealing with Probate and Family legal matters. The pro-bono, volunteer, and staff attorneys I have observed and met with so far are amazing, and really do so much for the clients they see at the clinics, even if just chatting for a few minutes. This is such a unique and important skill.

The Family and Probate areas of law are far broader than just divorce or child support, which are what I initially thought much of my time would be spent learning about. I was very mistaken, and have been exposed to guardianship, immigration, parenting time, restraining orders, wills, and much more already.

MWLS is an incredible place, and an incredibly busy organization, and even with the business of the work, I can see how the attorneys work together and help to support and ensure continuity of care in one another and in their clients. I feel very lucky to learn from them, not only about client support but also how to manage vicarious trauma and self-care in such a specific and difficult area of work. I look forward to continuing to build skills for longevity in this field of legal work.

Update 2: In the past two weeks, I have been getting more and more client facing work experience!



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In addition to my typical paperwork and case noting responsibilities, I have had the opportunity to accompany a retired attorney who dedicates his time by volunteering at Lawyer for the Day clinics each week, and even taking on some cases pro bono. He and his regular clients like to joke that he's really not retired because he works just as much as when he was in practice.

I have gotten more and more experience with the probate side of these clinics, and have learned that just as much (if not more, in some complicated cases) help is needed for things like probating an estate or petitioning to become a personal representative as is needed for divorce or custody matters. In the same line of thought, just as much compassion and empathy are needed for these situations, which was somewhat surprising to me.

In these few weeks, I have spoken to individuals who have lost loved ones: their children, their cousins, their parents, and their spouses. The process of ensuring these estates are able to be taken care of is not a kind one, nor an intuitive one. Rather, it involves many different forms and information collection, and if you initiate an informal action when you should have started a formal process, you have to start completely over. Being able to help with some of the paperwork completion is a very pleasant and person centered experience that I have enjoyed. Just chatting with people and doing some simple data entry (and re-entry, and re-entry, and so on) is something small that I feel capable of doing and something that seems to help them. This is a side of the legal field that I really, truly enjoy: being able to work with people, as people who are experiencing something challenging, and making a hard day just a little bit better.

Update 3: One thing I really appreciate about Public Interest work is the collaboration with colleagues. When working with folks who qualify for legal aid services, it is not uncommon for clientele to overlap from one unit of legal specialty to another, and even across fields into social work and psychology. Recently, the interns at MetroWest Legal Services had a training and discussion about social work and working with indigent clients. The LICSW discussed the many moving parts of their work, how they deal with certain situations (such as mandatory reporting and Section 12), and how important it is to find ways to cope and ensure self-care. The legal field is not one famous for a reputation of self-care, but I think it is crucially important – especially when working in legal services with highly sensitive situations – to emphasize and prioritize that aspect of the work.

The LICSW explained the collaborative efforts between De Novo and organizations like MWLS. I come from a case management background working with folks receiving public assistance for developmental disabilities, and I personally loved being able to work with other members of the “teams” supporting people. The idea of growing into a field that is able to support people in a different way, whether that be family law, immigration, benefits, or something different, while also retaining that aspect of ensuring other needs are being addressed through efforts like working with a social worker is really exciting to me.



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The training was really timely for me, as I had actually just met with a Lawyer for the Day client whose husband was being held in a civil commitment due to mental health diagnoses. The patient seemingly did not remember his wife or son and had a history of experiencing hallucinations. Knowing that there are resources available to help address not only the legal aspect of the situation, but also the mental and emotional care for her and her son and husband is a huge asset. I feel more prepared engaging in similar conversations in the future knowing there are organizations to help.

Update 4:

In the past two weeks, I've learned even more about the impact and importance of access to justice. Last week, during another Lawyer for the Day Clinic, my supervisor and I had the pleasure of speaking with a woman who was dealing with a custody issue. She had waited for hours as we worked through the chronological list, and each time I went to the lobby area to check on her she was kind and patient. There was another attorney, not connected to the clinic or MWLS, who had finished his hearing earlier than anticipated and offered to help some of those who were waiting, and she continued to let folks who arrived after her speak to him.

Once we were finally able to call her in, she sat quietly at the table and explained that she was working on finding more stable housing and was waiting to see if she got her voucher approved. She was living with her brother and sister with her son and had been for a few years – very stable housing. She went on to say that she thought she was doing the right thing by communicating with information to the father of her child but was then served papers for a motion for a speedy hearing and motion for temporary orders. We reviewed the paperwork with her, and all of the allegations made seemed to be a direct attack on her character rather than anything with substantial truth behind it. It was a long visit, and an emotional visit, but we were able to work to prepare her for the appearance the next week, prepare an answer, and provide resources for some potential pro bono assistance to stand with her on the date of the hearing. When she was walking out of the room, she looked at us and said she was grateful she waited to talk to us.

This experience has been one of the most formative during my summer. Being able to take time and not only address legal concerns for a great mother and a survivor of domestic violence, but also give her some comfort that what the document she was served with says does not define her, and is not even necessarily truthful in any depiction of her. I feel so honored that she waited to speak with us, and grateful that the circumstances lined up that day to afford us some extra time to spend with her.

Legal services and free clinics are an amazing way for folks to get their legal questions answered, maybe some paperwork done, or additional resources. But people need a lot more than just the services generally provided at these clinics - not due to any fault of an attorney, but simply



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because the demand limits the time able to be spent with each client. Clients do need their legal questions answered, yes, but they also need to be validated in the stress and real impact that legal issues have on someone's life, and that is something I will hold onto as I continue my summer and eventually go into practice.

Final Reflection: Throughout this summer, I have had the opportunity to work with countless amazing clients. I have been given a lens into the lives of so many people being shuffled through the probate and family law realms of the legal system, and I have learned that there is only so much justice to spread among them. There are so many single mothers, many survivors of domestic violence, so many elderly or single folks working to gain guardianship of a young loved one who came to them through unique circumstances, and so many people working toward bettering themselves. I have seen how challenging it is for people working to improve their lives through the systems available to them, while it feels like the justice system is working against them.

The world of legal services is so much broader than I ever anticipated, and I have loved working within it. I love getting to speak with people, person to person, and hearing about their experiences and their growth. We are all growing and changing all the time—while some of us are benefiting from the chance to grow within our own support systems of mentors, friends, and family, others of us are growing while fighting. I have experienced so much personal change—in my life and in this season of law school—and seeing the Lawyer for the Day clients come forward and expose all the ways that they have experienced so much change has been an honor. In order to receive LFD services, you have to be so vulnerable and honest about your income, your past, and whatever led you to the clinic.

It has been so amazing to be able to function in that environment and to be able to listen. Many times throughout my summer internship, I felt like I was being given the gift of listening to someone's story. People bear themselves and tell you about their worst day, or their best day, or just a day that fell into their life that they never expected. That is such an honor, and one that I have learned takes so much to process in a way that is deserved.

This summer did not end up being what I expected it to be, but it was so valuable. Not only did I get to learn so much about the different areas of probate and family law, but I also learned so much about people and how everyone deserves to be treated. I have seen that even those who have experienced the worst should be given access to justice and have an equal opportunity to share their story.