



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: For the last three weeks I have been working with the non-profit organization Massachusetts Advocates for Children. This organization is dedicated to removing and helping to dismantle systemic barriers to education for vulnerable populations. The clients who I am working with are families who fall below the federal poverty line, children with disabilities, and English learners. My first few weeks I have been given a variety of responsibilities such as research, writing memorandum and attending meetings. Every aspect of this role thus far has given me a deepened understanding of what systemic inequity looks like in the classroom, and how to support these clients. Often clients who are seeking the help of MAC, are being denied their basic right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).

These violations of FAPE can happen in a variety of different ways and can mean something different to each family. For example, these types of violations can range from a missing crucial element of an Individualized Education Plans (IEP) or being suspended without a proper hearing/ justification. I am currently working with a client who has been denied basic transition services for their special education services and is no longer being offered support. Cases such as these are not uncommon, or rare, rather they happen every single day. MAC takes on a multitude of cases at no cost to the families and as an intern I am working directly with my mentor to help get students the rights they are entitled to. I look forward to seeing what my position holds for me over the course of the coming weeks.

Update 2: I am now a month into my internship at Massachusetts Advocates for Children. This last month has been truly such a great experience thus far. Specifically, within the last two weeks, I have been working directly with clients to better assist them through our helpline. Through these calls, parents can contact MAC with any questions or concerns and speak to one of the team members. From there we can provide direct recommendations, services and help



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depending on each issue. It has been great to see how the legal research I have been doing applies directly to some of the systemic issues I am seeing on these calls. Often the work I did with specific statutes and regulations has come into the issues I am seeing directly. I have learned that special education law is incredibly nuanced and layered, often school districts and DESE have different ideas on how services should be executed. It is great to work in a space that allows me to learn not only learn through research and writing but also through doing. My mentor at the organization Sarah is willing to always answer any questions I may have and work with me hands on to understand both the work and how I am feeling. I am looking forward to the next few weeks of this experience, and I am very grateful for my work thus far.

Update 3: This week at my internship has proven to be one of the most important weeks I have had. As the school year has ended, parents and families' primary concern is making sure that they have the supports necessary to start next year. As a result, most of the client calls I am taking are focused on ensuring that these supports are accessible and in place. Through this process I have been able to see first-hand what this looks like. I have seen what the attorneys at MAC need to ask, request, and prepare for when entering school district meetings. Ultimately this process has shown me that access to legal information and the law is an incredible privilege. Families are not just asking how to support their children, they are asking what the law says they are entitled to. As an intern, I appreciate being able to contribute to this process in a way that truly matters. I am also working closely with my supervisor on systemic advocacy project regarding black students over representation in special education. This work is incredibly important, and I am truly welcoming the opportunity to conduct research on a topic that does not always get the attention it deserves. As I finish up my last 3 weeks at MAC, I am incredibly grateful for all I have learned!

Update 4: The last two weeks of my internship I have taken on a different role than my usually assigned duties. The paralegal who works for Massachusetts Advocates for Children is out which means I have taken on her responsibilities. With this work, I am responsible for the records which MAC receives from the school district regarding possible clients, pro bono referrals, or additional services. When a possible helpline caller comes into MAC the next step is to request the records from the school district. The students' records often have the answers to many of the questions which the client has or MAC needs answers to. Once I get the records, I organize them by file type and create a case chronology. The case chronology is one of the most important aspects of the case because it is a comprehensive record of all the records we received from the district. Often this document is the first line of referral for possible pro bono attorneys or outside legal aid organizations. It provides not only a timeline, but a summary of all evaluations, IEPs, team meetings, etc. needed to build a possible case. This experience filling in for the paralegal has been incredibly eye opening for me as I have appreciated being able to see and work on the origins of a case from the beginning.



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Final Reflection: This summer working for Massachusetts Advocates for Children has offered me a learning experience I will never forget. Prior to coming into this experience, I knew I was interested in Education Law and was seeking out an opportunity to gain experience in this field. This summer, I was given the opportunity to do just that. From the start I was given the opportunity for a hands-on experience in more ways than one. I was able to work with my direct supervisor to assist with her case load, as well as systemic advocacy projects. I was also able to work with multiple members of the MAC team to learn more about their specialties whether it be school discipline or helping immigrant students and families. Ultimately, this experience helped reinforce my interest in practicing education law and being not only a resource but an advocate to navigate the complexities of the public-school systems.

Through my time at MAC one of the most meaningful projects I worked on was writing a memo on transition services for my supervising attorney. The case law surrounding transition services for special education students can be complex and requires independent analysis on a case-by-case basis. Writing this memo not only provided the MAC staff with new and updated information regarding these services but gave me the opportunity to learn more about special education law. This summer I learned a lot about the intricacies of working in not only public interest but special education law. It was often difficult to identify a problem and want to advocate for the client as best as possible, knowing they may not get the services or opportunities they want. I learned that education advocacy is not only identifying a problem and working to make it right but being someone to listen and validate a family as they struggle to navigate an already complex system. This summer I was also grateful to learn how to be an advocate not only for clients but for myself. I developed skills on how to better advocate for myself as a member of a team, and balance when I was taking on more work with what I could truly handle. I truly valued my time at MAC this summer and hope to continue to work in spaces such as this.