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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: Coming into my position as a non-profit legal research intern, I understood the role of lawmakers to be important because they write the rules that other people are obligated to obey. After my first week of this internship, I am starting to understand that the duty of a lawmaker is also to write clear laws. When the process, responsibilities, and consequences mandated by a law are unclear, other governmental officials who know they are required to obey the unclear law can be pressured into making decisions based less on what is best for their constituents, and more on avoiding the expressed penalties. The wellbeing of the public interest depends on an entire network of people, sometimes with limited oversight and opportunity for correction, all doing their jobs well to provide clarity of process.

I am also beginning to see the effect of direct advocacy. This week, I watched a recording of a City Council meeting where the Council voted on a motion which would either facilitate or prevent further reach into the community by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. The public was invited to comment. Only about three people spoke, presenting a variety of perspectives to discourage the motion's passage. One speaker even presented legal research previously compiled by the non-profit I am currently interning for. The Council ultimately voted in favor of the public's comments, rejecting the motion. Though only a few people spoke, I wonder whether the personal stories, critical inquiry, and legal research shared was the proverbial ammunition that the Councilmembers needed to reject the motion.

Update 2: One of the shared passions of the legal team I am working with is movement lawyering. The research assignments that I contribute to form a backdrop of information that the attorneys draw from when they decide which projects they are going to undertake. The team is small; I was surprised to realize that every intern is working on a very different assignment and



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am excited to inquire in one of our upcoming team meetings about how they relate to one another.

For a small team, I am impressed at how big of an impact the organization has already made. I've seen information from the organization appear in my searches on my research topic, and as previously mentioned, have watched materials created by the organization be cited in a presentation to a local city council deciding an important issue.

Most impressively, as a small team interested in movement lawyering, there is a lot of emphasis on coalition-building. Before this summer, my understanding of mutual aid and coalitions was mostly as theoretical concepts rather than realized practices. It was a largely unfamiliar relationship structure. Yet, seeing the large, cross-organizational meetings that my organization participate in, and the ease they have in reaching out to other partners, brings to light a compelling point about the non-profit legal world: legal aid rests on mutual aid. Organizations that can refer clients outside their own capacity and seek information from partners do better research and serve their causes better. Legal aid, in public service, must be expansive to be effective.

Update 3: One of the major takeaways from this past week of work has been the importance of asking the right question in legal research. This week, I researched laws related to asset forfeiture. In my first inquiry, I learned a lot about the legal processes involved in the actual forfeiture itself: the required timelines, the forfeiture declaration, the writ which permits the actual property seizure, the penalties for improper process. This search highlighted the procedure through seizure, but it was my supervisor's follow-up question which focused on the effects: what happens to the assets afterwards? While my original search had yielded a basic answer to this question, neither of us were expecting me to find very much additional information. Instead, I came across not only an entire section of governing law related directly to the distribution, management, and record of asset forfeiture, but also multiple secondary sources which summarized and reviewed this information. The difference in results between the two searches was due to asking the right question; even though the searches were intimately related to each other, the added specificity unlocked so much more information.

Update 4: One of the lessons I am taking away from the internship recently is the difficulty in ensuring that laws are actually being followed. There are plenty of regulatory laws across different sections of government, providing in great specificity certain operational requirements for government agencies. However, the existence of a requirement does not necessitate the existence of any tracking service to, at minimum, determine whether a law is actually being followed. Often, there is no readily, publicly available information to indicate whether financial requirements are being abided by. Further, the enactment of laws is a largely separate process



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from their enforcement. I recently came across a law which explicitly stated that its enforcement provision is explicitly inapplicable to one of its sections. In other words, that section is wholly unenforceable. What, then, is the functional difference between an unenforceable law and a recommendation?

There are meant to be solutions to this information inefficiency: freedom of information laws are designed to bridge any gap between how the People (through our lawmakers) believe the government should be operating and how it is. However, this gap appears more difficult to cross given the modern trend of government agencies ignoring requests made under these laws. This failure to abide by the infrastructure designed to correct information inefficiency undermines the strength of both the law which prescribes that information be available publicly and the law which demands specific requirements of the government.

Final Reflection: Working with Project South over the summer has changed my understanding of what it means to work in a team for coalition-building. My internship was remote. The lack of shared physical space required much more active communication about deadlines, meeting times, and commitment to the organization than my previous in-person roles. Our team meetings were also crucial to the formation and maintenance of the feeling of working towards an overarching goal beyond the scope of our individual projects. In these meetings, we shared updates regarding our individual assignments but were also asked to share what was on our minds more personally regarding the news and what was going on in the world. These meetings served as opportunities to learn from one another, both about the sources and strategies we use in our work assignments and also about what perspectives and truths we hold onto to maintain drive and motivation amidst the slow pace of movement lawyering. My supervisor shared with the interns various opportunities to attend webinars and other meetings relevant to expanding our background knowledge about current events, as well as with other partner organizations.

From my experience at Project South, one of the lessons I most appreciated was that of what it means to maintain a relationship with a partner organization. Scheduled meetings, sharing wins and losses, and a joint willingness to provide resources like time and information to one another's projects were essential for those relationships to thrive. Another key takeaway from this internship was the meaningfulness of these shared resources and information, and the direct impact they can make on local government. Watching local city council meeting where an audience speaker cited Project South in her re-iteration of the harmful effects of ICE activity struck me as a concrete example of how the many branches of movement lawyering, which can include information dissemination, create real-world change. Likely in part due to the audience members' commentary, the city council voted to abstain from further supporting ICE. There is tremendous value in lawyers working to distill complicated issues into digestible pieces for others to both understand and to share that understanding with others.