



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Sofia Castellano
LAW SCHOOL	Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law
ORGANIZATION	Philadelphia Legal Assistance- Family Law Unit

Update 1: During my first week at Philadelphia Legal Assistance, I received training alongside interns from other Philadelphia nonprofits. It was interesting to see the range of work the different organizations did, from family advocacy in dependency cases, housing and eviction cases, to helping low-income families navigate government benefits and how these services interact to serve clients holistically. It was enlightening to hear from professionals who had been in the field for decades about their outlook on the nonprofit space at a macro level, as well as from those providing direct client services every day. In my second week of training, I learned more about substantive family law matters, including custody, child support, alimony, divorce, spousal support, and protection against abuse orders. With different attorneys, we worked through hypothetical exercises and best practices for interviewing clients, especially survivors of abuse. We also got to shadow the Help Center at Family Court, where paralegals and attorneys provide legal information and assist anyone who comes in seeking help with filing custody forms. There are so many barriers that impede clients' ability to navigate the family court system effectively without representation, so having such a resource is essential to help ease families' burden when engaging with the system.

Update 2: I began conducting intakes with individual clients independently, providing them with information on custody filings, protections from abuse filings, child support, and divorce proceedings, depending on their case. I discuss each intake with my supervisor to see if it is a case we could represent (usually only the clients most vulnerable are selected for representation, as the organization has limited capacity) and draft an advice letter based on the information they provided during the intake. We may also refer clients to other organizations for accessible representation if we cannot take their case and provide referrals to other resources, such as counseling, if needed. I'm familiarizing myself with issue spotting during intake calls and will



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provide specific information when possible. For example, if a client has a custody hearing coming up, I can explain how they can present evidence, what kinds of evidence the judge is likely to find most relevant, the eleven factors judges consider in custody cases, which witnesses they may bring, etc. This week, Philadelphia Legal Assistance is also partnering with a local immigration rights nonprofit called Juntos to provide a Family Law-focused Know Your Rights presentation. I am leading the presentation, and my supervisor will be there to answer any specific follow-up questions that may arise.

Update 3: I helped several clients complete their custody petition forms while working at the Family Court Help Center. Most family court petitioners in Philadelphia are pro se, so the Help Center plays an essential role in guiding petitioners through the complicated paperwork to file. Because I was there on a Wednesday and the court only accepts expedited motions on Wednesdays, I was able to help clients file expedited motions to request a faster hearing in the upcoming weeks due to time-sensitive issues. For example, a parent not having the information necessary for the child to continue receiving health care-related treatment without interruptions and needing information the other parent has but is withholding. I also conducted several intakes, issue-spotting during calls, and directed clients on their next steps and how to prepare for upcoming custody-related hearings. Many of my intakes this past week included guiding grandparents seeking partial physical custody, as one of the children's parents was deceased. The work has been challenging but rewarding. I have learned so much about custody, child support, and protection orders from abuse in the past few weeks. I observed custody proceedings in court one morning. It was interesting to see the different approaches attorneys and judges take based on the eleven custody factors judges consider in Philadelphia.

Update 4: This week I observed an attorney from the Medical-Legal Community Partnership Unit represent a client in a Protection From Abuse case. It was encouraging to see the holistic approach this unit takes as a 'one-stop shop'. The client was able to obtain a PFA and apply for many different public benefits with an attorney's help, all within three hours. The partnership's placement in various health centers across the city makes it easily accessible, demonstrating a well-rounded, integrated approach that addresses many of the client's needs simultaneously, making services more approachable and effective. On a separate note, in many of my intakes this week, I saw cases where one party weaponizes authorities, such as DHS and courts, to harass the other party and fuel additional conflict between parties. This issue emphasizes the importance of having access to counsel so parties can navigate these complex systems when the other party retaliates by filing many petitions all at once or calling DHS repeatedly. I also saw a few cases where interpreter services were needed. One of my clients told me her case had been continued because there was no interpreter available. I also observed how a good interpreter can make clients feel truly seen and heard, empowering them to advocate for themselves in court with confidence.



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Final Reflection: Through my work at PLA this summer, I learned the importance of holistic client advocacy. I came to understand how important it is to have a broad network of resources and organizations to connect clients with, so that their needs can be addressed holistically rather than focusing only on a legal issue.

I saw firsthand how difficult it can be for clients to navigate the Family Court system without representation, and how important counsel can be in affecting outcomes. Although approximately 90% of family litigants in Philadelphia represent themselves, meaning parties are not typically at a disadvantage going pro se, I saw how this can create a system in which petitions are weaponized and parties become stuck in long, drawn-out processes. It struck me how much discretion exists in family law, from judges to clerks, and how much a litigant's experience can vary even when the facts are similar. These experiences made me appreciate both the importance of legal representation and the responsibility that comes with advocating for someone in such an unpredictable system.

This summer also helped me develop my client communication skills. I became more comfortable knowing what follow-up questions to ask and identifying legal issues on the spot. I learned that effective advocacy is not always about having the immediate answer. Sometimes it is about listening carefully enough to figure out what the client is asking for, what they are worried about, and what resources or support might help them beyond the legal system.

The work could be emotionally taxing and draining but having a team that understood that made a huge difference. Everyone on the team was willing to listen, help, and share their knowledge. Whether it was sharing a resource, talking through a difficult client interaction, or identifying an organization we could connect a client with, my colleagues consistently went out of their way to support one another and, ultimately, the clients we served.

Although it was a challenging summer, I learned so much about custody, PFAs, child support, and the realities of practicing family law day-to-day. I learned from a dedicated and caring group of trauma-informed attorneys and paralegals who consistently went the extra mile for their clients. I am extremely grateful to have learned from them this summer.