



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

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Update 1:

During my first few weeks at Bread for the City, I learned about the specific services provided by the organization under the categories of housing law, family law, immigration law, and public benefits law. For housing law, I learned about the interconnectedness of legal aid organizations in D.C. with regards to providing housing assistance, most notably through participation in the Landlord Tenant Legal Assistance Network (LTLAN). For family law, I learned that the organization serves individuals who identify as survivors of domestic violence and also provides assistance with child support. I was also surprised to hear that there was overlap between family law and immigration law in the practice, in that the organization serves immigrants that suffered domestic violence in their home country via the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Finally, I learned about the myriad ways that the organization assists in ensuring that D.C. residents can access and maintain their public benefits.

Throughout the process, I was also taught the importance of trauma-informed work. One particular phrase stuck with me: "Moving at the speed of trust." This phrase emphasized that when working with low-income clients, it is important to be mindful of the traumatic events that may have occurred prior to their becoming a client of the organization. I was educated that the process of accessing services can in itself be traumatic, and as such, it is always important to provide grace and be patient when having client interactions. Legal aid organizations like Bread for the City provide an important bulwark in stemming the effects of poverty, but it is not a cure-all. I took away the importance of acknowledging that there are systemic issues at play in all the cases that the organization takes on, and while our organization can assist in one portion of it, there are typically other factors outside of the organization's control.



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Update 2:

My time at Bread for the City has been incredibly informing so far. I have had the opportunity to attend hearings, wherein I have observed both custody hearings and landlord-tenant hearings. There, I was able to observe how cases are argued before judges, and learn about the common legal principles that are important to the respective courts. I have also had the opportunity to research topics for attorneys. Specifically, I have had the opportunity to research a proposed bill in D.C., the Uniform Unregulated Child Custody Transfer Act, and observe a D.C. Council hearing regarding the proposed bill. I presented my research in the context of important questions posed by the attorney as to how this Act may affect the clients that we serve. Additionally, I have had the opportunity to prepare and present a legal research memorandum. This memorandum focused on how D.C. courts have treated and defined "joint physical custody" in family law cases. This was highly interesting, as there was a lot of nuance in terms of the underlying law and how family law courts are meant to apply the law for the interests of the parties in the case. Looking forward, I am excited to have opportunities for more client interaction.

Update 3:

I have increasingly had more opportunities for client interactions and client-focused work at Bread for the City. I have had the opportunity to answer calls to our organization's legal clinic using our "on-call" system. There, I have had the opportunity to speak with callers who are seeking specific services from our organization. If they were seeking services that we could not provide, there would often be referrals to other organizations that I could provide to them. This was an enlightening experience, as I saw firsthand the importance of our organization in ensuring that people have access to the legal services they need. Often, callers will not know who to turn to, and our organization may be the first to provide resources of who to contact. Alternatively, our organization may be able to directly assist with our intake process. During this on-call process, I also had the opportunity to use interpreter services to contact callers. As such, my knowledge on using language access services expanded. Looking forward, I am also working on a few projects which are less abstract, and more directly client-focused. For example, I will be working on drafting a motion to dismiss pleading for a client's case. I believe these experiences will be enlightening in terms of their direct impact and in terms of learning the intricacies of specific cases.

Update 4:

In the past few weeks, I have had the opportunity to work on both a research memorandum and improve my client interaction skills. My research memorandum involved researching public benefits and how they are issued, going into the deep technical requirements. This was heavy, but fascinating, as in researching this information for our organization, I myself learned about the public benefits process. Additionally, I improved my client interaction skills when I shadowed



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an attorney in the weekly “Attorney of the Day” housing court assistance program. There, I had the opportunity to see how cases are brought in directly from people waiting in the courthouse. I shadowed the attorney as he went through the retainer and information process with new clients, and explained the type of representation he would be providing. Specifically, I spent most of the day following a client who required an interpreter, which added another level of interest and education to the client interaction process. The day began with the attorney explaining that he would provide limited representation for the pre-hearing negotiation process with the attorney on the other side. After the negotiation, he patiently explained to the client the results from the negotiation and the client's options moving forward. The client chose to proceed with the hearing, which then gave me the opportunity to observe a hearing in which witnesses were called and evidence was presented. Throughout this process of shadowing the attorney, I made sure to remain engaged and present in order to maximize the client's comfort. In this process, I saw the importance of having attorney representation for clients. With the client requiring an interpreter, it was all the more important that they be able to present themselves and their evidence in front of the court as effectively as they could. Having an attorney advocate for you in a legal system which operates in a different language could help reduce barriers needed in order to keep essential services and housing.

Final Reflection:

At the beginning of the summer, I was excited to dive into a diverse array of experiences, from different areas of the law, to different forms of legal work (client interactions, research, drafting). I knew that Bread for the City would be able to provide me this experience, and I worked hard to achieve this throughout the summer. However, I did not realize how welcoming the atmosphere at Bread for the City would be, for both clients and for the staff members. Some of my most lasting impressions came from the opportunities I had in speaking directly with clients and directly with attorneys regarding the minutiae of different cases. For example, I had the opportunity to speak with a Russian-speaking client as they discussed their case with the attorney. This allowed me to make a cultural and linguistic connection with a client, deepening their trust in the process. At other times, I had the opportunity to observe client meetings at housing court. There, I tried to instill trust by dressing professionally and quickly completing tasks requested by the attorney that I was shadowing. However, some challenges would arise when people at the courthouse would ask whether I was an attorney and/or ask attorney-specific questions. There, I had to quickly clarify that I was not an attorney, and that any questions should be directed to the attorney, who would be best able to answer any questions. Throughout the summer, I developed this capacity to think quickly on my feet, as oftentimes, urgency was highly important. However, there were also times when I could research with deliberation into matters.



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Writing research memorandums was another source of both successes and challenges. Developing an in-depth memorandum was gratifying, as I could put the legal researching and writing skills I learned in law school into practice for the benefit of clients. I knew that my research into these topics would assist the attorneys at the organization in better understanding the underlying issues in the matter. However, challenges arose when I had to present one of my research memorandums to a group of attorneys: I was presenting my family law memorandum to almost the entire family law team. Here, I was nervous but felt confident that I knew in-depth the topic that I was discussing. I presented each section of my memorandum, and answered questions as they came about the topics. Answering questions was more of the more difficult parts, as some of the questions were very searching, and as such, I had to provide quick answers on the spot. However, in the end, I was confident that I had produced a good work product for the attorneys to take away.

In assisting at Bread for the City, I developed both my interest in specific spheres in law, and further developed my client interaction skills and research and writing skills. I deepened my interest in family law and housing law, and, in speaking with various attorneys, further developed my understanding of how one can practice law. I became more open to asking questions as my time at Bread went on, including overall career questions.. I greatly enjoyed my time working in the public interest sphere, and solidified my interest in continuing my career by working for the public interest. The environment that Bread for the City cultivated for their clients and for their staff greatly contributed to this.