



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1:

Already in my first few weeks at Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, I have learned so much about family policing and the insidious ways the state surveils Black and Brown families, especially in the Bronx. I have been staffed at Neighborhood Defender Service's Bronx Conflicts office, which was opened in 2024.

The office's proximity to the courthouse has allowed me many opportunities to shadow and observe various types of Family Court hearings. I have observed and participated in intake days, in which Neighborhood Defender Service, among other legal service providers, is assigned to appear on behalf of clients facing abuse and neglect allegations from ACS. While intake days can be hectic due to the tight turn-around time, it is comforting that NDS attorneys and social workers are able to show up for clients at likely one of the most challenging moments of their lives.

I am grateful to be able to witness zealous and caring advocacy firsthand while also having the opportunity to learn important trial advocacy skills. The intern supervisory team has thoughtfully curated several trial advocacy training sessions. So far, we have learned how to prepare for a cross examination and mooted it with the intern team and supervising attorneys. This training will be directly applicable to my assignments later in the summer when I participate in permanency hearings and do direct and cross examinations.

Update 2:

My time at NDS so far has been very meaningful. I have learned a lot about emergency hearings in Family Court under abuse and neglect dockets, also known as § 1027 or § 1028 hearings (named for the respective sections of New York's Family Court Act). Emergency hearings have



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become especially relevant as it has become more and more clear that ACS has been systematically abusing their emergency removal power to remove children from their parents' or caregivers' homes without an imminent emergency, or in situations in which they had enough time to procure an order from the court yet did not do so. The prevalence of "emergency" removals is shocking to say the least. In a recent instance, a client has his young daughter removed from the home by ACS at three o'clock in the morning, but two days later only for ACS to return his daughter to his care because they had "made a mistake." The trauma this "mistake" caused this family was wholly inexcusable and unjust. However, recently, I also bore witness to the rare, yet invigorating examples of why these emergency hearings are so important to protect families' constitutional rights to integrity: I was able to shadow a recent emergency hearing that NDS won on behalf of a young mother.

Update 3:

I had the opportunity to work directly with a client, Mr. C, under the supervision of an attorney, to prepare an affidavit to be used as part of an order to show cause to ask the court to expand visitation for Mr. C and his son. It was a unique experience to listen to Mr. C speak about his life experiences and his relationship to his son, and to collaborate with him to put his affidavit onto paper in a way that would be strategic for his case, compelling to a judge, and authentic to his voice, all at the same time. As Mr. C spoke about the way he spends time with his son, and how happy his son was whenever they were together, I learned more about the importance of client-centered defense. Mr. C had originally come into the office to discuss a potential emergency hearing, a relatively demanding undertaking since emergency hearings typically involve daily court appearances, testifying in court, and being subjected to cross examination by the other parties' attorneys. After talking to Mr. C, we learned that his priority wasn't necessarily immediate restoration of his son to his care, but rather to spend more quality time with his son, and to ensure he was able to build a meaningful relationship with him.

Update 4:

Recently, I have been working with my intern supervisor to file for an emergency hearing to return our client's son back to his care. As part of this process, I devised a list of important topics to discuss, expanded this list into a list of questions, and began reviewing case files to brainstorm a theory of the case. I led the first interview with Mr. R to gather information about the allegations in the ACS petition. I was careful to listen to his responses and ask follow-up questions to clarify and dig deeper into the facts. I spoke with Mr. R a second time, when he came in person to meet with us. It was an excellent opportunity to observe my supervisor prioritize certain issues and phrase her questions in a way that would make the client feel comfortable discussing very private and challenging subjects. When we would get to discussing these issues, I would explain why we needed to ask the tough questions and why his honesty was important to what we could accomplish on his case. This was an important experience in



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building rapport and trust with a client and taught me how you might have to alter the way you approach each client interview based on the issues at hand and each client's personality.

Final Reflection: I learned so much from my summer at NDS, not only about Article 10 proceedings in New York Family Court, but also about client-centered defense, and what it looks like to show up for a client during one of the hardest moments of their lives. I am grateful to Equal Justice America for making it possible for me to do this work in a sustainable way.

I know the direct services and litigation skills I gained from my time at NDS this summer will be invaluable to my professional development as an attorney and future public defender. I had the opportunity to lead several client interviews, collaborate with a client on an affidavit, participate in client counseling sessions, and to comfort clients at the table during court appearances. While my supervising attorney was out of the office, I was charged with Beyond the meaningful direct client experience, I learned how to review and digest discovery, draft cross and direct examination questions, conduct intake interviews, and prepare for permanency hearings. I encountered a wide variety of issues across disciplines, including situations where family court proceedings had potential effects on clients' criminal or immigration cases. I know the skills and on-the-job training I gained from this summer will be directly applicable to my 2L internship and to my career beyond law school.

I also was grateful for the opportunity to work in a public defender office which prioritized holistic defense. I learned how social workers were an integral part of the family defense practice, advocating for clients in family team conferences with ACS, engaging in early defense work and coordinating with service providers to ensure the clients' service plans actually aligned with their needs as much as possible. Often, the social workers or out-of-court advocates, many of whom had their own personal lived experiences with the family policing system, had a unique rapport with clients and were integral in making the clients feel understood, heard and supported by the legal team. This has solidified my investment in working in an office in the future which prioritizes holistic legal defense and understands that the out-of-court advocacy is sometimes just as important, if not more so, than the purely legal solutions.

This summer internship experience was very important in helping me to understand what I want from a future career in direct legal services. But, more importantly, I also had the opportunity to learn from the clients I worked with about resilience, familial integrity, and the very human parts of system-involvement. I will carry this experience with me in my personal and professional life as I navigate the world with a new sense of perspective, empathy and compassion.