

Summer Internship Experience with the DC Employment Justice Center

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During the summer of 2011, funded by a SPIL stipend and an Equal Justice America fellowship, I worked at the DC Employment Justice Center as a summer law clerk. The DC Employment Justice Center (EJC) is a local legal service organization that provides legal advice and assistance to low wage workers who are concerned that their employment rights have been violated. EJC provides assistance through a weekly workers' rights clinic, full legal representation in a limited number of cases, pro-bono referrals, and policy advocacy.

Before entering law school I worked for several years at a community based non-profit helping refugees who had recently immigrated to the U.S. resettle into their new community. Most of these individuals found jobs in low wage employment where job security was fragile. The experience of working with this population early in my career clarified for me the crucial role that employment plays in both upward momentum and in an individual's personal sense of dignity. It also enlightened me to the uneven power dynamic between employer and low wage worker that causes low wage workers to be vulnerable to exploitation.

When I entered my internship with the EJC I knew that employment law violations were happening in the District, however, during my internship, I was often surprised by the brazenness of the violations that workers brought to my attention. Particularly troubling were the instances of extreme disregard for basic and clear laws such as minimum wage —violations were usually suffered by individuals who were assumed to be less aware of their rights, such as immigrants.

My work at EJC was mostly in support of the organizations weekly workers' rights clinic. During clinics I conducting client intakes and interviews and during regular office hours I did legal research on new or complex employment law issues that surfaced during the clinics. I was introduced to and researched a wide range of employment law issues from discrimination to contractual violation to the wage rights of interns, however, what stands out in my mind from my

summer internship is the waiting room packed with workers on the evenings of the workers' rights clinic. Most of these workers felt that they had been unfairly and illegally treated and had reached the point where they felt they no longer had the expertise to remedy the situation without legal guidance. The EJC was able to provide this guidance, filling a gap that would otherwise have left many of these workers, who could not afford attorneys, helpless to assert their legal rights.