

Sukanya Dutta
Summer 2018 Report
Equal Justice America

This past summer, I had the great honor and pleasure of being a legal intern for the LegalHealth department of the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). I am extremely grateful to Equal Justice America (EJA) for their fellowship grant that helped to make this internship possible.

In my opinion, NYLAG is one of the purest public interest and legal services organizations operating in the State of New York. Since NYLAG does not take STATE FUNDS, it is not limited by following any federal or state poverty lines in deciding which clients to represent. And it is very rare for any client to be turned away from the NYLAG.

As an intern, I was assigned three attorney supervisors: Norma Tinubu, David Tanis, and Katie Ocampo. They were all inspiring, extraordinarily dedicated to their clients, and very kind. Their expertise and openness made me feel comfortable to take on the complex and time-sensitive cases they gave me.

Once a week, I would attend legal clinics with Mr. Tanis at the Lincoln Medical Center in the Bronx. We would meet with potential clients and do intake. Many of the people we met with had legal problems related to the health issues, and it was wonderful to see how patient and generous Mr. Tanis was with everyone. I learned from him that patience and listening are vital qualities for a substantive and meaningful attorney-client relationship.

Part of my internship was completing intake for people who called NYLAG's Veteran Intake Hotline. With both Mr. Tanis and Ms. Ocampo, I worked with veterans to help maintain housing and resolve issues with landlords, acquire military benefits, and

track down documents of citizenship. My work with Ms. Ocampo introduced me to clients who lived in upstate New York, so it was interesting to learn about legal issues outside of the “bubble” of New York City.

The bulk of my internship was spent working with Ms. Tinubu, who supervised immigration cases for the LegalHealth unit. Ms. Tinubu’s intelligence and tireless compassion made impossible cases seem possible. Clients returned to her over the years for legal assistance with adjustment of status forms, green card and citizenship applications, and stays to access lifesaving care via Medicaid. Besides filing immigration forms, we also coordinated with doctors and social workers to ensure the best possible outcomes for our clients.

One of my favorite assignments with Ms. Tinubu was adjusting status for a family who had come from Bangladesh. My parents are originally from Kolkata, India, and my fluency in Bengali gave me the opportunity to translate for one of the family members. Being able to use something personal from my life, like my parents’ language, in a professional context was one of the most special moments of my legal career so far.

Working for NYLAG reinforced my passion for public interest work. The people there give real meaning to equality and due process by giving legal help to people who cannot access private attorneys and are neglected by the government. Thank you again to Equal Justice America for supporting both my internship and NYLAG.