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Equal Justice America Summer 2018 Fellowship
Helping those affected by the storm

The day I got accepted into law school was one of my proudest moments. I knew that I was entering a path in which I could dedicate my working years to helping others. Going into law school, I had no idea which area of law I wanted to pursue. I attended plenty of different legal society events and meetings trying to figure out which area of law I wanted to pursue over the summer, but nothing really stood out to me. By my second semester of law school I was becoming more involved and when the opportunity arose to become a student pro-bono director, I took a chance and joined.

I was introduced to public interest legal work through the student pro-bono department. After speaking with attorneys that worked for legal aid, I understood what public interest work entailed and how much good it does for the community. I realized that legal aid offered a variety of services in different areas of the law to client's pro-bono. Since I was still struggling to find which area of law to pursue, working the summer at a public interest law firm sounded like the best path to take. That way I could gain experience in different areas of the law ranging from consumer to family, while helping those most in need of assistance.

I got a chance to work with Three Rivers Legal Services as a law student volunteer my spring semester. This later transitioned into a summer fellowship with the grant provided from Equal Justice Works America. My supervisor at Three Rivers Legal Services, Karen Millard, was a former professor of mine and the Disaster lawyer working under a grant by the Florida Bar for victims of Hurricane Irma. All the work I got to do this summer was primarily related to helping those in the community affected by Hurricane Irma. I got to write FEMA appeals for clients that were denied assistance but were still greatly in need. For many of the clients that we helped the road to recovery was long and many were close to giving up before they got helped from Three Rivers Legal Services. It was such a great feeling when we would get news that a client won an appeal or that we were able to get the repairs done that were still needed by connecting them to local organizations that were helping rebuild the community.

We set up an outreach center near the area most affected by the disaster. Through that outreach, I got to personally call around 115 individuals still in need of assistance. I even helped with the intake process to assess their needs. Altogether we helped the local long-term recovery group to contact over 4,000 households off the FEMA list. A little over 200 of those individuals ended up still in need of assistance. From those 200 households around 40 needed legal assistance in the form of a FEMA appeal or help with an insurance claim. We were able to help all those requesting legal assistance almost immediately.

I never realized how much legal aid could assist during and after a major disaster. Something that may seem daunting or take months to complete to most individuals, could easily be accomplished with the help of an attorney. My experience working at Three Rivers Legal Services was humbling, knowing that my efforts this summer helping those affected by the hurricane actually made a difference. I know that the work I did this summer helped others for the better. I thought my proudest moment was when I got accepted into Law School but this summer I realized my proudest moment now was being able to help those affected by the hurricane, that were still struggling to get back on their feet.