

Marissa Jeffery

Summer 2018

EJA Fellowship Report

Thank you so much for sponsoring my fellowship this summer. I've spent the past few months working at the Austin Medical-Legal Partnership (AMLP), a collaboration between Texas Legal Services Center (TLSC) and the People's Community Clinic (PCC).

One of the best outcomes of this summer was that it cemented my desire to start my own medical-legal partnership in my home state of New Mexico after graduation. Last year, I took a life-changing class on healthcare for vulnerable populations. During that class, I was introduced to the concept of a medical-legal partnership, as well as to the framework of "social determinants of health," and to the ways in which legal issues can catalyze health problems. While I knew that this way of thinking about health and inequity seemed like a powerful tool for deciphering how the law quite literally impacts bodies, I didn't know if I would actually like working at a medical-legal partnership on a daily basis.

It turns out, I do. I found it incredibly rewarding to work with clients on the legal issues that face them and that directly impact their health. I also loved the systems-level research that I was able to pursue. This summer, I worked on a wide variety of issues, including:

- Appealing an SSI denial for a 65-year-old woman with chronic kidney disease
- Writing a divorce petition
- Changing a father's name on a birth certificate
- Establishing parental rights for the girlfriend of a woman who's recently given birth
- Healthcare decision-making for newborns
- Securing housing for a woman on SSI
- Determining landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities
- Researching the ethical dimensions of limited scope representation
- Researching the rights and legal remedies for people struggling to pay utilities bills
- Researching the rights and legal remedies for renters with pest infestations
- Accessing an earned income tax credit
- Combating predatory lending
- Upgrading veterans' discharge status

While I found the exposure to a variety of legal issues to be fascinating and useful, I want to focus my MLP after graduation on maternal health, namely with regards to substance abuse and domestic violence. Happily, I was able to do a significant amount of work with the attorney at AMLP who leads a program on legal interventions for pregnant women using an innovative method for group prenatal visits called "Centering." Seeing a young attorney who is doing work similar to what I want to do after law school was very impactful. Having her as a mentor is an invaluable outcome of my work this summer.

Reflecting on the bigger picture, my work this summer revealed how tenuous the social safety net is for people living in poverty in Austin. The mythos of Austin—that it's a creative hub for techies and countercultural elites—is one that is inaccessible to the majority of folks in Austin, many of whom are

working-class and people of color, and who are struggling to make ends meet in an increasingly expensive city. For the people in Austin who don't have the ability to drive Teslas, own the latest wearable device, or go to expensive music festivals, the social safety net of SSI, SSDI, SNAP, WIC, EITC, Medicaid, and Medicare is imperative to their survival. This fact is often lost in the public policy discourse around social entitlement programs. In this way, my work this summer has changed my perspective on poverty in America, and has sharpened my desire to continue working on behalf of people in poverty following graduation.

Thank you again for your support, without which I would not have been able to do this work.