

## **Report from Sheila Hayre on her Two-Year Post-Graduate EJA Fellowship at the New Haven Legal Assistance Association**

Unlike most of my fellow Yale law graduates, after finishing law school and clerking, I wanted to remain in New Haven and work as a public interest lawyer. Given the paucity of public interest job openings in New Haven, without Equal Justice America's two-year fellowship, I would likely have found myself facing the prospect of either leaving New Haven in search of public interest work or remaining here but starting my career at a local for-profit law firm. Thanks to Equal Justice America, for the past two years, I have worked as a staff attorney at New Haven Legal Assistance Association (NHLAA) providing direct legal services to the poor. As my two years as an EJA fellow draw to an end, I have received the welcome news that NHLAA is able to offer me a permanent position so that I can continue doing the work I feel I have only just begun.

I specialize in family law—including divorce, alimony, child custody and visitation, and child support—and immigration. As one of only a handful of attorneys who speak Spanish at NHLAA, I have found myself working primarily with monolingual Spanish-speaking clients. At night, I teach pro-se divorce classes in Spanish. As my experience with this population grows, I have become painfully aware of the absence of basic Spanish-language services for these litigants, services which are available in English because they are viewed as necessary to preserve access to the courts. For example, although the local courts offer a myriad of basic informational pamphlets to assist the growing number of pro se litigants, there are rarely corresponding pamphlets in Spanish. While state law requires parents to attend parenting education classes before they can divorce, there are no such classes offered in Spanish in New Haven or its environs. Time and time again, I encounter monolingual Spanish litigants who are forced to show up in court on the day of the hearing in a contested custody case without any idea what the legal papers they were served with say. All this occurs despite the recent news that Hispanics—no longer African-Americans—are the largest minority group in New Haven. I recently met with the Litigation Director here at NHLAA, and, in the upcoming year, I plan to redouble my legal and non-legal efforts to address these deficiencies in our system.

In addition to handling more traditional family law cases, I am one of the few legal aid attorneys in the state who offers basic immigration advice and assistance to the exploding population of immigrants here in New Haven and in Connecticut as a whole. In particular, I assist immigration clients in preparing and submitting VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) self-petitions. This immigration remedy permits an abused spouse or child of a United States citizen or permanent resident to “self-petition” for lawful immigration status without the cooperation of his or her abuser. In partnership with an immigration expert at the Yale Law School's Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization, I also participate in an outreach clinic, in which we educate documented and undocumented immigrants about immigration law in general, advise attendees about their rights, and answer questions.

Together with a handful other legal services attorneys here in the state, I developed and implemented a series of immigration trainings to educate domestic violence shelter advocates and legal aid lawyers statewide about the special issues facing immigrant survivors of domestic violence. I continue to train professionals who interact with this client

population—including law enforcement, court personnel, and shelter advocates—about topics such as basic immigration law, exploring domestic violence through diverse cultures, and immigration remedies for domestic violence survivors.

The stories of my clients are often far from heartening. I work with clients who are terminally ill, some of whom have died while I was representing them. Other clients of mine suffer from crippling mental disabilities that hinder them from acting in their own best interests. As is the case with anyone working with survivors of domestic violence, I have had clients return to their abusers, only to regret their decision, or, especially in the case of undocumented immigrants, calculate somewhat unassailably that they are better off returning and enduring the abuse than facing alone the uncertainties and instability that their illegal status makes inevitable.

But especially with the immigrant population, I have seen how legal intervention can empower clients to transform their lives in radical ways. I am inspired by those who walk through our doors with incomes that are either non-existent or well below the poverty line and who leave our office with incomes that would render them ineligible for our services and with plans that promise a hopeful, new future. I am indebted to Equal Justice America for making possible my work at New Haven Legal Assistance and for making the continuation of my work here a reality.