



Summer 2019 EJA Fellow:



Name: Shadia Ajam

Law School: American University College of Law

Fellowship: Human Rights First

Entry 1:

Last week I started working with Human Rights First's Refugee Representation team here in NY. Currently, I'm working with an attorney to prep two clients for their asylum hearings this month. The two clients were forced to leave their homes in Central America after they were persecuted by gangs in the region. I've been meeting with one of the clients to prepare her declaration, and the other is preparing for questions she'll receive during her hearing. The process of obtaining asylum in the U.S. is changing every day with the current administration, so the team is constantly on the lookout for news regarding new laws, procedures, or anything that could affect our clients. I'm looking forward to continuing the work and helping our clients and their families establish a new home here.

Entry 2:

During my third week I participated in client screenings for the first time. Every Thursday Human Rights First opens their doors to individuals looking for legal representation for their asylum cases. Usually, the organization screens around 10-20 people each week. The process consists of a 20-minute interview where we ask the individuals questions about why, when, and how they came to the U.S. to determine whether or not they would be eligible to apply for asylum. The individuals who come in are all from diverse backgrounds, but right now we're mainly seeing several asylum seekers from Central America and the Middle East. After the interview, the managing attorney at the organization reviews each case and makes a decision within a month. If Human Rights First has the capacity to take the case, they will. But this is rarely the case given the massive caseload the organization is currently taking on. So, what usually happens is the organization will send out e-mails to law firms around the city and wait for an attorney to take on the case.

Entry 3:



Most of my time towards the end of June and beginning of July was spent working on a client's affidavit for her asylum application. I met with the client about three times before finishing it. Initially, it seemed as though the client wasn't very comfortable sharing what she had gone through with me. At first, I didn't quite understand why she was putting up a wall. But I quickly realized that she was having a hard time opening up about her past because it brought up bad memories. I spoke with several staff attorneys and even the social worker at the office so I could get a better sense of how to handle the situation. It wasn't until our last meeting that she opened up about her experiences in detail. I was also staffed on another case where the client's individual hearing is coming up. I mainly help translate during meetings with the client and the staff attorney. I've realized that translating is pretty tough when it comes to a profession where every word matters, so it's been a challenge at times.

Entry 4:

The client that I helped translate for eventually ended up being granted asylum. I went to the individual hearing, and it was probably the most rewarding experience during my summer at Human Rights First. The attorney staffed on the case wasn't feeling super confident about our case, so neither of us expected much from the individual hearing. To our surprise, the judge ended up issuing a lengthy opinion explaining her decision to grant our client asylum. When the judge finished speaking, I went to the waiting room and told the client's daughter to come into the court room. I still remember how our client's daughter ran up to our client and hugged her in tears that day. It was really moving, and I was so happy to just be part of the process even if I had recently been staffed on the case. My experience at Human Rights First definitely confirmed my interest in asylum law. I hope to continue working on asylum cases after graduating law school, whether it be at a firm or at an organization like Human Rights First.