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I was fortunate to be a recipient of funding for my internship through Equal Justice America. With the help of the summer fellowship, I was able to pursue my commitment to social justice by working with survivors of domestic violence. I spent this summer as an intern at Ascend Justice, formerly known as the Domestic Violence Legal Clinic. I split my time between the Order of Protection clinic, helping clients fill out Emergency Orders of Protection, and Ascend Justice's Independence Project, which focused on assisting survivors of domestic violence receive various types of immigration relief.

Ascend Justice's main office is located in Chicago's domestic violence courthouse, and their Order of Protection clinic is housed there. Pro se litigants come into the clinic, and volunteers and interns help to fill out paperwork and take their affidavit; file it; and escort the client up to the courtroom so they can be seen before a judge. The clinic's clients are people who have recently suffered from some form of domestic violence, but almost always it is not the first time abuse has occurred. Some clients' affidavits would date back to past years of abuse. Due to years of compounded history, more often than not, I would sometimes be with one client for upwards of four hours to take their testimony.

To me, client interactions were the most valuable part of my summer experience. The clients I worked with were going through some of the worst hours of their lives while we were together. Beyond filling out paperwork, I sought to make clients feel heard and appreciated. For some, this was the first time they had processed the trauma or abuse they suffered aloud, and that could be an overwhelmingly emotional experience. I learned to be present with clients and reaffirm that they were making the right choice to take care of themselves and to put space between them and their abuser. I am grateful that many clients felt comfortable to trust me in their most vulnerable moments.

At Ascend Justice's Extended Services office, I worked as part of the Independence Project team. The Independence Project provides representation for undocumented domestic violence survivors seeking relief under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) or through a U-VISA, a nonimmigrant visa for victims of crimes in the United States. Here, I was able to witness the months of processing, paperwork, and immigration court dates that go into obtaining permanent resident status in the U.S. Working in immigration in 2019, during a summer in which many Immigrations and Custom Enforcement (ICE) raids were threatened on the immigrant community, was eye-opening to the trials many people had to face to stay in the country. It was baffling that people who so clearly to me deserved aid were being denied under new regulations. Despite systemic setbacks to the immigration process, Ascend Justice gave me hope for a more just future through legal aid.

Ascend Justice provided other free services to offer a holistic approach to the clients' well-being. There was a good deal of overlap between the Order of Protection and Extended Services offices. A client who worked with the clinic might be referred to the Extended Services office to receive help with a divorce from the Family Services division, or economic retribution through the Economic Justice Project. Additionally, in both offices, a client support coordinator (CSC) was available on staff. The CSC often served in the capacity of a social worker to connect the clients to social benefits programs, as well as check in with them during an emotionally difficult undertaking. Not only did this allow the attorneys and legal interns to better complete their tasks, it gave the clients further much-needed support.

I am deeply grateful that I was able to spend the summer after my 1L year at such a mindful legal aid organization. The work I did this summer helped refuel my passion for and commitment to public interest work. I am equally thankful to Equal Justice America for providing a fellowship opportunity to me so that I could make a difference in my community.