



Summer 2019 EJA Fellow:

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Fellowship: Atlanta Legal Aid

Entry 1: June 3, 2019

I'm two weeks into my internship with Atlanta Legal Aid, I wasn't sure what to write for this post because I haven't really been working on "one big case". But that's not really what Legal Aid is. Most days I work on a variety of cases and projects - really whatever comes through screening. Some days we have to work quickly (literally, within hours) to prevent or stay an eviction. Some days I spend doing research for long term projects with the potential to be high-impact cases - such as preventing development that would replace (gentrify) naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH) and displace residents, or figuring out why the watershed is charging some low-income households so much for water they have to file for bankruptcy. Many days I spend doing work somewhat outside a legal scope, like looking for subsidized housing for our clients or soliciting moving assistance funds.

Essentially, the common thread is that I work on anything that will prevent our clients from becoming homeless or lose their public benefits (which consequently, would likely lead to homelessness). The work can be draining, but it's vital to our clients and I'm glad to be a part of an organization that provides these free and necessary services to underserved communities.

Entry 2: June 18, 2019

It's my fifth week at Atlanta Legal Aid. To be honest, this week has been really really rough. I enjoy working in Legal Aid because we have the opportunity to provide more holistic services to our clients, including social services they may not otherwise have access to. But unfortunately, our resources are limited and often my best outcome is to simply stabilize a situation rather than provide a long-term fix, despite my best efforts.

Last week, I worked with a family whose grandmother had recently passed and they were looking to cash out the life insurance policies the grandmother had taken out on them because they couldn't afford to pay the premiums. While an influx of cash (nothing extravagant, by the way) would be incredibly helpful to anyone living in poverty - our public benefits system isn't designed to uplift, only stabilize. For the months my clients' "incomes" or "resources" reached over a certain amount, they would be ineligible for medicaid, social security income, and possibly their housing vouchers and SNAP (food stamps) benefits during those months. I had to



propose my clients put their money in a burial fund, something neither of us even knew existed up until then. Somehow, my clients were grateful for help navigating the complex public benefits system nonetheless. And for anyone who can't relate to living on a fixed income, remember that many people are one major unexpected expense (medical, car, etc) away from food insecurity, inability to pay their bills, and/ or homelessness. These systems function to kill us, and I had to bear witness to that this week. Legal Aid is critically important to put up a defense to these systems and assist our most vulnerable neighbors. Difficult as it may be, I'm grateful to be in a position to help where I can.

Entry 3: July 2, 2019

It's week seven at Atlanta Legal Aid. I've been working on a lot of public benefits cases lately - mostly SSI/ disability, food stamp trafficking, and medicaid. This stuff is complicated and every time I learn one thing it takes me down another rabbit hole. It doesn't help that benefits are sometimes terminated without good reason, or even through the carelessness of DFCS/ DHS, SSA, and DCH (see: <https://www.gpbnews.org/.../georgia-cut-30000-poor-elderly-an...>). To make matters worse, recipients with their benefits terminated are often required to pay these departments back.

Food stamp trafficking cases are especially difficult because the burden of proof is nearly impossible to satisfy, and the consequences are devastating (one year, two years, or indefinitely barred from the SNAP program). DHS will target a store potentially trafficking food stamps - selling for cash, selling ineligible foods, etc. - and will then move to terminate recipients' benefits that allegedly shopped there based on an arbitrary monetary and transactional limit within a certain time period (usually many years ago). The recipient then has to prove they were actually buying SNAP eligible foods all those years ago, which is extremely difficult without a showing that they literally weren't even in that area at the time. This is especially difficult for our chronically homeless clients.

I am consistently impressed by the proactiveness of our clients in navigating these bureaucratic structures, but also unsurprised because for them it's a necessity. Throughout this, I've wished the public were more familiar with the strenuous process and eligibility requirements for public benefits. Maybe then we could dispel the long-standing stigma around public assistance and the narrative of the "welfare queen"/ benefits abuse.

Entry 4: August 1, 2019

Tomorrow is my last day at Atlanta Legal Aid. I somehow managed to make my last week the busiest, with back to back hearings in the first half. On Tuesday, I represented a minor in a reconsideration hearing for termination of his social security disability benefits. Yesterday, I represented a client in a food stamp trafficking



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hearing. Both were a little nerve racking, but I had done the work and felt prepared - as well as indignant about the importance of each.

In the food stamp hearing in particular, my continuance for discovery was granted to give us time to gather info to determine whether one store's EBT POS machine was used in another location - which would explain why several of our clients swear to never having shopped there. This means I may be back for the rescheduled hearing in October!

This summer has felt both incredibly long and shockingly short, now that it's nearly over. Working at Atlanta Legal Aid has felt purposeful and impactful, and has affirmed my desire to continue direct services to underserved clients.