



Summer 2019 EJA Fellow:



Name: Nicolas Sawyer

Law School: University of Texas School of Law

Fellowship: Texas Fair Defense Project

Entry 1:

I'm coming up on the end of the second week of my time with Texas Fair Defense Project this summer.

I thought I over-emphasized the impact and work that they do in policy and direct service related to money in the criminal legal system. But actually, TFDP is as incredible as I'd imagined. I'm so incredibly humbled to be working under three badass bosses who have already taught me more about actual lawyering than what I've learned in a year of law school.

I've had the awesome privilege to be working on a legal research project related to pretrial fines and fees as well as done intake for their phone lines. I've heard some heartbreaking stories of the injustice the folks calling in have faced at the hands of the system. But I'm grateful to have at least been able to offer an ear to hear them out with the issues they're facing (and then later they will be referred to someone who may be able to help). The legal research is also incredibly interesting on an intellectual level. It's really cool (and maybe I'm over-romanticizing) that I get the chance to read SCOTUS opinions in order to write motions/habeas petitions that can be used in making actual constitutional arguments in very low-level courts. I'm talking about municipal courts.

These courts are packed to the gills with people that our local governments are trying to criminalize and tax for the simple crime of being poor or being black/brown. And it's these low-level courts that have the widest judicial discretion and the least oversight. This is awesome practice for preparing for my future legal work as a public defender.

I'm grateful to have been given some support by Equal Justice America and hope that if you've got any change to spare, send it over to EJA for the work they do supporting legal aid work done by summer students like me.



Organizations like TFDP that host fellows like me can't afford to pay us the big law salaries of most summer interns that I go to school with.

Thanks for your support.

Entry 2:

I just finished my fourth week of my time with Texas Fair Defense Project this summer.

I had the opportunity to be a part of a driver's license clinic this past Wednesday, with a little more knowledge under my belt and a little more understanding of the mechanics of how these events come together as a collaboration between Travis County JP1, TFDP, Texas Law pro bono program, and of course the wonderful volunteer attorneys. The big takeaway I got from running the front intake for the clinic was how important speaking slowly and speaking clearly is. I'm learning how to speak to folks I'm trying to help in a way that "does work." Specifically, in a way that gets them to where they need to be in as digestible a way as possible, with no dilly dallying on the legal reasons.

Particularly, for this clinic, there was a time crunch, both in responding to people's questions and for making records searches. I'm really getting a sense for the incredible importance of expediency in this legal aid work. Every second that someone spends with me working on their issue is a second of their life that is on hold. They want to get back to their families and on with their lives. They didn't ask to be there and they're not there for fun. For me it's different. I'm there for "work" and the legal aspects of it are interesting. This is a really important lesson going forward with.

I am also working on a project that involves getting a sense of criminal legal practices throughout Texas and it consistently surprises me how diverse the approaches are even in one state. This experience is a huge reminder that so much of the crucial decision making in the criminal legal system take place on a very local level. Local elections and local decision making are the key point of intervention in change for this system.

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Entry 3:

I am blown away at how quickly this summer has gone by.

I feel like I've really settled into my work at @Texas Fair Defense Project and have gained more confidence in my work with clients.

I recently started a new assignment writing letters to folks incarcerated who are asking for driver license help or help with other legal issues (which we refer out). As a side note, I'm delighted at all of the detailed technical skills I'm gaining around the administrative aspects of direct services. For example, knowing to write "legal mail" on the outside of mail so that it isn't read or searched by corrections officers and how to print addresses on envelopes.

I'm also getting a sense for the kind of work that I like best. At TFDP, I do a big mix of work. Some involves working directly with clients over the phone in getting at their issues and inviting them to clinics and gathering information. I also do some important administrative work in pulling records online and organizing spreadsheets and preparing files for the clinics. Helping run the driver license clinics will be a huge benefit to me as a pro bono scholar next year continuing to do the same.

It's also interesting to consider what mental place folks are in when they come to us. Generally, people coming to get their licenses back are in a mixed state of tiredness but also hope. I see them after they've decided to take a big step towards getting out from underneath the debt that the system has dropped on them. I imagine that would be different than meeting someone several hours after they've been picked up and jailed. I'm curious to try different direct service experiences to see what different states people are in when they come in contact with some form of legal services.

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Entry 4:

I've got two weeks left of my time at the Texas Fair Defense Project. I'm going to be really sad to go. I have had so much joy in the work that I'm doing and find so much fulfillment in it. I wish I could drop out of school now and begin to work for them. The next two weeks will be spent wrapping up the outstanding projects and preparing all of the materials I've gathered and created for the next round of interns to come behind me.

I've been researching practices across the state in the area of criminal system debt (the people we provide direct services for all have this issue in common) and am hoping to finalize a report on my findings. I've also been working on habeas petitions that will hopefully be used in practice. I'm really grateful for the two hard working fellow interns that I've had the pleasure of working alongside.

I hope I get the opportunity to continue to work on projects with the attorneys at Texas Fair Defense Project in the coming months.

But the biggest lessons I will gain will probably come out in the next week. I'll be sitting down with each of my three bosses to get a final exit review. They've had the chance to supervise me and my work and so will be able to offer great insight on my weaknesses and areas for growth.

Looking forward to finishing these two weeks strong and continuing to grow from these relationships!

