



Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: American University Washington College of Law

Organization: Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities

Entry 1:

Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities began in 2001 as part of a settlement in a class action that closed D.C.'s institution for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, Forest Haven. The best part of interning here so far is conducting intake. It's the chance to talk on the phone (we're still remote) with people with disabilities, their family members, and other friends about what's going on in their lives. Then preparing a memo about legal issues and next steps. Because most initial calls do come from supporters, the first next step is the same -- let's hear from the person with disabilities himself or herself about what they want. That's what it's about.

As for the law, I've been learning especially about alternatives to guardianship, particularly supported decision making. Supported decision making is a device that allows individuals to authorize supporters to assist them in making important decisions. But crucially, and unlike guardianship, legal rights remain in the individual. After all, with a document or not, that's how many people make decisions -- with the advice and guidance of a few key supporters.

Entry 2:

The coronavirus pandemic is drastically affecting people with disabilities. When I first heard this, I implicitly attributed this to the presence of disability. But in fact, a major part of the story is also that many people with disabilities live in institutional settings. This gets at the difference between a medical model and a social model of disability. A medical model focuses on the person's perceived deficiencies. A social model recognizes that a person's differences are experienced as challenges when society erects unnecessary barriers. COVID-19 requires a medical response. It also requires a social and legal response. Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities is



working with the District of Columbia's Department on Disability Services and other stakeholders and advocates on a different future for people with disabilities in the District.

Entry 3:

Yesterday I helped prepare for and observed a meeting of the District of Columbia Department on Disability Services (DDS) Mortality Review Committee. This committee reviews the deaths of all people served by the DDS Developmental Disabilities Administration. So the first thing is to acknowledge six District residents who lived important lives and who persevered through great difficulty. They were served by DDS, but also harmed by the District in real ways: some lived for many years at Forest Haven, the District's horrid former institution for persons with disabilities.

The Mortality Review Committee demonstrates how interdisciplinary teams can work in action. Yesterday included civil servants, a doctor, nurses, and a lawyer. On teams like these, lawyers are positioned to push for systemic change. Input from medical professionals can translate into written guidelines for the future. And perhaps more importantly, lawyers can be voices of accountability to ensure that the statutes, regulations, policies, and guidelines we already have are being followed.

Entry 4:

On Friday, I completed my internship with Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities. I'm very grateful to Equal Justice America for helping to make this experience possible. The summer came with opportunities to improve my writing and research skills. But as with many things in life, the best part was the people. I loved being with Jessica A. Bronson and Morgan Whitlatch, two lawyers to look up to. I also want to add that the people I have in mind who made this a special summer include all those individuals who called the office over the past months. They took a chance on me even after I said I was an intern, not a lawyer. I do not think that is something I should take for granted. I'm looking forward to classes again and taking the next steps in my education at American University Washington College of Law!