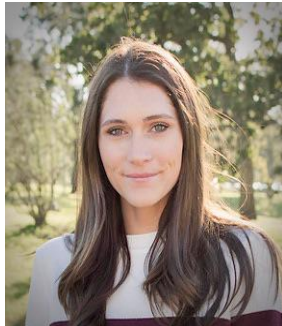




Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



Name: Melanie Bell

Law School: Brooklyn Law School

Organization: The Legal Aid Society – Juvenile Rights Practice – Brooklyn

Week of June 15th

I have just started the 3rd week of my internship with The Legal Aid Society in the Juvenile Rights Practice in Brooklyn, NY. I am working on abuse and neglect claims, as well as juvenile delinquency in Kings County. Because of the stay at home order, the offices are closed so everyone has been working at home, which has been an adjustment. Most of my work thus far has been researching and writing but I will be able to attend (via Zoom of course) more hearings once the courts open up more. Today we attended a zoom training on secondary trauma. Working in this field and seeing the children who are a part of the system can lead to early burnout. But listening to the Legal Aid attorneys speak about how they deal with the tough times and the immense fulfillment and joy they feel in their jobs, some working there for 30+ years put me at ease. I look forward to representing and fighting for children this summer and in the future. Please consider supporting Equal Justice America so they can continue to fund fellowships for those committed to the public interest and seeking justice.

Week of July 6th

I have been at my internship with The Legal Aid Society in the Juvenile Rights Practice in Brooklyn, NY for a little over a month. Because most of the courts in NYC are still closed I have worked mostly on research and speaking with clients. I have really enjoyed getting to know the clients, hearing about their experiences and in some cases getting to advocate for them. I get to work with some amazing, resilient children and getting to give them a voice has been a true honor. Working in this field can be difficult, but also so rewarding. In today's climate it is even more important to get out of your comfort zone, learn and listen to people who have different life experiences than you. It's incredible the insight that children so young have about the world around them. Please consider supporting Equal Justice America so they can continue to fund fellowships for those committed to the public interest and seeking justice.



Week of July 27th

This week at my internship at The Legal Aid Society in the Juvenile Rights Practice. I presented, along with my supervising attorney, a Legal Aid social worker and a past client, on Parenting and Expecting Youth that are placed in Foster Care in NYC. The hurdles that come with being a child in foster care are compounded with the challenges of being a teen parent. Children in foster care can additionally become the subject of a child protective investigation themselves, even losing custody of their child. These cases place the child who was once being protected, in an adversarial position with CPS. Teen parents who are placed in foster care are under intense scrutiny, which at times leads to allegations of neglect or abuse that are unfounded. The things that the teen parents in foster care are alleged to have committed would not lead to a case with any other parent. These parents were being set up for failure based on this bias, but luckily things are starting to change as courts come to recognize this discrepancy. Please consider supporting Equal Justice America so they can continue to fund fellowships for those committed to the public interest and seeking justice.

Week of August 10th

This was the last week of my internship at The Legal Aid Society in the Juvenile Rights Practice. I will miss working with my clients, mentors and fellow interns. Even though I was not physically present, me and my fellow interns bonded over our shared experiences with the many zoom meetings, virtual court and challenges with clients and the system. In our last lunch meeting all the interns spoke with my supervisor, a 20-year veteran of The Legal Aid Society, about the challenges and rewards that come with being a public interest lawyer. Some of those things she mentioned I have already experienced first-hand. The joy of connecting with a child and getting to advocate for them are some of the many positives that come with this job. But along with that comes the secondary trauma from seeing abuse and neglect every day and working in a broken, inherently racist and classist, system. There are good and bad aspects of every job, but the fulfillment that comes from giving children a voice outweighs every negative aspect of this one. Please consider supporting Equal Justice America so they can continue to fund fellowships for those committed to the public interest and seeking justice.