



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: George Washington University

Organization: Ohio Justice and Policy Center

Update 1:

After completing my first year of law school at George Washington University, I did not think I had the skills or knowledge to start a legal internship. Yet, after two weeks in my internship, some of fears are confirmed. Law school does not teach empathy.

In my work with the Ohio Justice and Policy Center, I assist clients with any post-conviction issues. These issues range from an appeals process for someone on death row to assisting a returning citizen seal their records. Many of my phone calls with clients involve hard conversations about the most vulnerable moments in their life. In these calls, I have experienced the breadth of human emotion. From the tears of regret while speaking to a client with an upcoming parole board hearing to the joys when someone's record was sealed, law school did not train me to have empathy. It is a soft skill that develops outside of the classroom. Yet, it is a critical skill that is needed in public interest and often not given enough attention. The ability to listen cannot be undervalued.

The client interactions I have remind me why I came to law school. They ground me in my passion for public interest and the reality that my legal education has the ability to create change.

Update 2:

As part of my internship, I am writing a parole board memo for a client who is currently incarcerated. In preparation for his hearing, I have spoken with him and his family multiple times to gather information and create a holistic story on his behalf. The Ohio Justice and Policy Center has a motto that we "don't write people off." This has stuck with me throughout my internship. On paper, our clients may be perceived as violent, aggressive, or dangerous, but in reality, that is rarely the full story. There is always a deeper story to tell. I have spoken with clients who have come from an abusive home or have faced racial bias in their criminal



proceedings. Many of the drug-related charges come stem from an undiagnosed addiction. The story doesn't excuse their actions, but it humanizes them. I am grateful for each client I interact with because it helps build my skills and confidence to be a more well-rounded and grounded lawyer.

Update 3:

During these past few weeks with the Ohio Justice and Policy Center, I worked with an attorney on staff to write a safe harbor expungement motion. An expungement motion erases any criminal record for an individual who was a victim of sex trafficking. As part of this motion, I read through the client's affidavit and argued that her experience qualified her for expungement. Due to the heaviness of the material, it was hard to not become emotionally invested in the client. It often required me to take a step back from and balance the work with personal self-care. Public interest can often cause burnout because of the emotional intensity of the work. My internship has helped me reconcile the importance of boundaries and ensuring that I take care of myself so I can show up and be productive for our clients.

Entry 4:

My summer internship at the Ohio Justice and Policy Center exposed me to the in-depth injustices of our criminal legal system but also reminded me of the importance in fostering strong client relationships to help navigate the difficult times. The Executive Director, David Singleton, has a reputation of having the ability to connect with his clients and effectively advocate for their needs despite strong opposition at times. He gave a presentation about the importance of storytelling and grounded the discussion in the real case of Tyra Patterson. Tyra was imprisoned for over 20 years on a felony murder charge. She was wrongfully convicted but faced resistance on any of her appeals and parole board hearings. David discussed the importance of allowing Tyra to tell her story in her own words and emphasized the importance of how the story can often speak for itself.

From this experience, I learned the importance of listening to clients because they know their situation often better than you do. My job is to advocate for them but listen to what they want out of their case. Often, the lawyer and client may disagree on what the best path forward may be, but there is a vital importance to actively listening to the client and expressing empathy. Some of my most impactful moments were when I visited two incarcerated clients in prison. As a law student, I felt inadequate to help them, but I focused on forming a connection of trust and showing that I genuinely wanted to offer support.

Overall, my summer experience exposed me to the reality of criminal law. I had many opportunities to interact directly with clients, and I appreciated the opportunity to see how the law is realistically utilized.