



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



Name: Luke Myers

Law School: Temple University

Organization: Philadelphia Legal Assistance

Update 1:

June is flying by, which means it's time for my first EJA Fellow Update! I'm finishing up my third week with Philadelphia Legal Assistance and am starting to get a feel for both the organization and the work that I'm doing in the Unemployment Compensation Unit. My time with PLA began just as the state was implementing an upgrade to its unemployment system, which has made for an adjustment for both claimants and advocates as we all are navigating the new system and working through its glitches. A lot of the work that I've done so far has consisted of helping people get their claims filed, since the upgrade created a new and unfamiliar user interface. I also have a number of clients assigned to me at this point, as well as my first benefits hearing scheduled in about two weeks! I'll have the opportunity to represent my client in an administrative proceeding concerning their eligibility for UC.

Update 2:

Time for my second EJA Fellow Update! Over the past few weeks, I have begun to take on more clients looking for assistance navigating the unemployment system. As a result, I've become more and more busy and have had some great learning experiences. Earlier this week, I had my first UC hearing, in which I was the sole representation for a client who was denied benefits in her appeal. The decision was released today, and we won the case! The facts were on her side, and all I had to do was set her up to tell her story, but the feeling of successfully being an advocate was exhilarating, nonetheless. I'm finding that there are elements of this work that I enjoy and elements that are less exciting to me, which is an important component of this kind of internship.

Update 3:

You know what time it is! Here's my third biweekly #EJAFellowUpdate. I'm now well past halfway through my internship with Philadelphia Legal Assistance and am continuing to work with Unemployment claimants to secure their benefits. This past week, I've spent most of my time writing appellate briefs for the UCBR (sort of



like a Court of Appeals for UC). It's been neat to see the writing skills that I learned during my first year of law school employed in service of my clients.

On the other hand, it's been less neat to observe the mental and emotional toll that navigating our welfare bureaucracy has on poor people. For a lot of folks, their house, or their utilities, or their ability to afford food and health care is dependent on their ability to get unemployment when they lose their jobs. Our system, looking beyond eligibility requirements that I could characterize as petty, does not make it easy or straightforward for people to get their benefits, and the accompanying uncertainty when people get stuck causes a lot of anxiety. There are plenty of decision-makers at the state level who do not want low-income folks to have these benefits, and that is often reflected in the UC system's user interface, rhetoric, capacity to handle claims, claim decisions, and level of claimant support. Our office tries our best, but we can only do what we can do.

Entry 4:

Here's my fourth and final #EJAFellowUpdate. Last week I finished my internship with Philadelphia Legal Assistance, in their Unemployment Compensation Unit. It was a really wonderful opportunity to work directly with clients and closely with state bureaucratic systems. Everyone I worked with was quite friendly and welcoming, and overall PLA is a great work environment doing really meaningful work. I'd really enjoy working for an organization like that sometime down the road.

My biggest takeaway from my experience is that the bureaucracy needs to be easier to navigate for those claiming the support that they're entitled to from the state. This entails a budgetary investment in ensuring that the relevant offices are adequately staffed, but it also means that processes need to be simplified and more consideration needs to be given to straightforwardness of eligibility requirements and ease of user interface. Unemployment benefits, though greatly popular among and necessary for working people, have long been under attack by the political class, and the current disjointed system reflects that. Our organization helps as many people as we can that are trapped among the shortcomings of an ineffective system, but an exponentially greater number of people could be helped by systemic change.

As always, thanks to Equal Justice America and Temple University - James E. Beasley School of Law for helping to make this opportunity possible. If you can -- please consider supporting EJA. Legal aid organizations are often the only place to turn for low-income folks seeking legal assistance, and those organizations rely on dedicated public interest lawyers. EJA provides much-needed resources to make it feasible for law students to commit to working in the public interest.