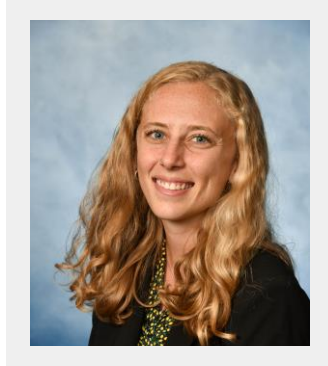




Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



Name: Sarah Zimmerman

Law School: Temple

Organization: Community Legal Services

Update 1:

As I begin my third week of work at Community Legal Services, I am reflecting on how much I have learned and how much more there still is to discover. After an orientation week chockfull of trainings, I dove right into my work in the SSI Unit. I have begun to form relationships with clients, some of whom I am helping apply for SSI for the first time, and some of whom are deep in the appeals rigamarole. Many of these conversations are difficult, as they center on physical barriers and emotional needs, and are teaching me to be a more empathetic advocate.

I appreciate the balance that CLS sets between direct services, policy work, and community education. I have had the privilege of sitting in on a number of coalition-building meetings, where advocates from across the country share best practices and lobby the SSA to increase funding and access to benefits. Later this week, I will support my supervisor in a community training on applying for SSI. Beyond simply enjoying being around and sharing space with others in my community, I know that these trainings are essential for spreading awareness and access to much-needed benefits.

Update 2:

As I near the halfway mark of my summer internship at Community Legal Services, I am struck by how much of my work is not something that they teach in law school classrooms. While I have gained a ton of experience with legal research and Bluebook citations at Temple, I have yet to discuss language access issues or how to get in touch with hard-to-reach government offices. This is the type of thing that you just can't learn in a classroom! I am looking forward to doing more clinic work in my 3L year to apply these experiences and continue developing my advocacy skills. I am also appreciating CLS' constant focus on what it takes to be an actively antiracist advocate, and the disability justice lens through which the SSI unit operates. Thank you EJA for making all of this learning possible!



Update 3:

Most of my time since our last update has been spent preparing for my first hearing before an administrative law judge, advocating for a client who was denied benefits by the Social Security Administration. This involves a lot of client interviewing, together with reviewing thousands of pages of medical records, writing a prehearing brief, and preparing for direct and cross examinations. I definitely feel some imposter syndrome— who am I to be representing this person, who is so deserving of excellent support? I am trying to channel those feelings into hard work and drive. My supervisor and other attorneys at CLS have been incredibly useful at building both my content knowledge and my confidence as I prepare for the hearing.

Alongside this individual client work, I've also had the privilege to engage in some systemic advocacy. I researched the SSA's treatment of substance use as a disability and am working with an attorney on a position paper advocating for policy change. I am also supporting the unit on a community survey about how systemic racism impacts their clients. Finally, later this month I will present at a CLE for social security attorneys on the "state of the law" involving SSI, so that advocates can use the latest case law to support their arguments. I have really appreciated the diversity of projects that I am getting to experience this summer at CLS!

Entry 4:

Last week, I had the chance to serve as the lead representative, via Pennsylvania's legal intern certification, for a client appealing a denial of benefits. Despite extensive preparation, I was extremely nervous. The hearing went well, and I feel proud of the work that I did. Throughout the process, I learned so much about client interviewing, hearing preparation and strategy, and oral advocacy. I'm incredibly grateful to CLS for trusting me with this opportunity, and to EJA for supporting this work.