



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: When I started with the Public Benefits Practice Group at Legal Aid Chicago, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect on a day-to-day basis when helping indigent people get and retain their benefits. I have since learned just how complicated and arduous the federal and state benefits systems are, not to mention how few resources are available to people who don't have legal representation. Being part of the Medical-Legal Partnership means that our clients are referred through their medical providers who have flagged that there is a legal issue the individual is facing with no legal support. This affords me the unique opportunity both to speak with a potential client to assess whether there is a legal problem we can help with and to work closely with existing clients to solve their legal problem (or direct them to someone else at Legal Aid Chicago who can).

One of the amazing things about working here and doing legal aid work in general is that our goal is to help anyone and everyone we possibly can. Attorneys have so much agency to navigate the complicated legal systems people are overwhelmed by and have few resources to properly engage with; whether it's helping a client get his birth certificate after experiencing homelessness, seeking backpay for improperly withheld benefits, or helping prepare clients for hearings with administrative judges, I have already seen clients access and maintain the benefits they need because they have an advocate on their side.

I feel incredibly lucky to do this work and look forward to seeing how the coming weeks reveal even more about the critical role lawyers play for people seeking life-sustaining benefits payments and support. I'm able to do it because of generous support from Equal Justice America.

Update 2: In the last couple weeks at Legal Aid Chicago, I have enjoyed spotting issues more quickly, seeing patterns emerge more easily, and feeling more familiar with the federal, state, and city statutes dictating the benefits our clients can receive. I am better able to help people when these processes come more naturally. But my work has recently been particularly special for the opportunity to work closely with two clients in particular,



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both of whom are in need of disability benefits. Foundational knowledge of statutes and how to address legal problems only gets us so far in these cases because of their slight deviations from a more typical case: one is a child, the other an elderly man; one speaks only Spanish, the other is fluent in English; one has a home, the other is not permanently housed. These slight particularities have already revealed how different two cases can be, even before getting to what their (also entirely different) disabilities are. In each case, it is clear that their initial applications for benefits would be much simpler if they were housed, or if they spoke English, or if they were able to sign for themselves as an adult. Being an advocate feels especially important in cases like these, because both clients should have access like anyone else to their disability benefits - but face circumstances that pose insurmountable barriers to access them.

Countless other people face these circumstances without being able to get the help they need. That's why it's increasingly important to encourage others to take up this kind of advocacy and enable a greater number of people to access advocates who can help them.

Update 3: With over half of my internship at Legal Aid Chicago completed, I am amazed at just how much I have learned in such a short span of time. The last couple weeks have been marked by breakthroughs for some clients, and setbacks for others; the latter is never easy to stomach, no matter how many clients we are able to help in the end. But staying motivated to do everything we can is an essential contributor to doing this work effectively and celebrating wins of any size can help mitigate some of the more disappointing outcomes. Sending out advice letters, talking with and reassuring clients, applying for benefits on their behalf, and drafting arguments serve as important reminders of just how much we can accomplish and how much we can empower our clients through legal advocacy to increase their chances of accessing the benefits they need.

Entry 4: As I approach the final couple weeks of my summer at Legal Aid Chicago, I am looking back with deep gratitude for this experience. This was my first opportunity to use my legal education and skills in practice and my first time working on disability issues among other public benefits issues. Being able to talk to clients directly every single day afforded me unique insight into the depth of legal problems and the pervasiveness of those problems in clients' daily lives. Sometimes I only interviewed a potential client who I would pass off to a different practice group within Legal Aid, and other times I worked on the minute details of a client's case and corresponded with them every day; either way, I felt reassured that I was doing everything I could for this particular client, experiencing this particular problem, and this particular time. The range of cases and issues I was able to see entirely changed my perspective on what effective public service looks like, and reminded me that with and without a law degree so many of us have the power to make a difference in a person's life.

Although my next work experience may not look the same as this one, I know this is just the start of my long career of public service work. I am excited to apply the skills I built this summer to problems down the road and advocate for more people where I can.