



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: University of Richmond

Organization: Blue Ridge Legal Services

Update 1: In addition to a public interest fellowship from University of Richmond School of Law, I'm receiving a summer fellowship from Equal Justice America for law students doing unpaid civil legal aid work. EJA requires its fellows to post periodic updates – mainly to spread awareness about the importance of legal aid, but probably also to make sure we're actually working, not using the funds to take a wild vacation. So here it goes, my first EJA Fellow Update:

For July and August, I'm interning at Blue Ridge Legal Services, a legal aid organization serving the Shenandoah and Roanoke Valleys. I work mainly at the Harrisonburg location, which is in a cute old house on High Street that's been repurposed as office space. The cozy, quirky setting suits the team's family-like dynamic, unpretentious style, and talent for creative problem-solving. I also happen to be a big fan of the vintage pheasant wallpaper (see photo below!).

So far, I've helped with a variety of small research projects on such varied topics as equitable ownership, bedbugs, contractor regulations, mobile home parks, detainee actions, and legal guardianship of elders. I'm also learning about the day-to-day workings of a law office – meetings with clients, closing memos, case reviews, etc. I had absolutely no knowledge of legal practice when I entered law school, so this is all new to me.

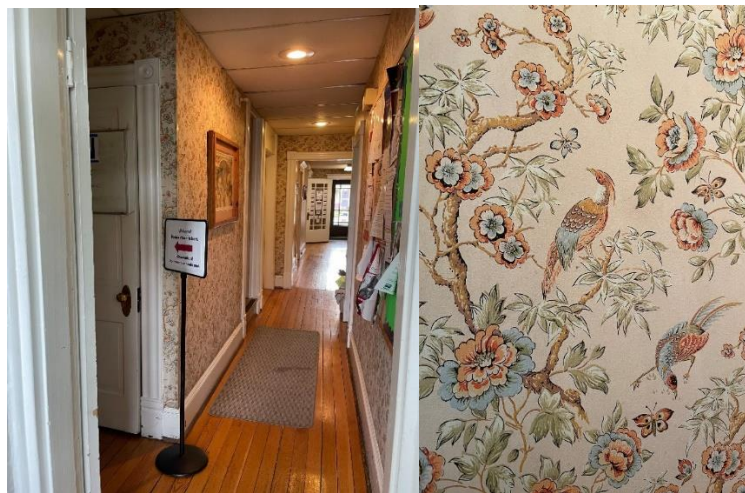
The highlight last week was going to JDR court to observe a custody hearing. It was the first time I'd ever even entered a courtroom. The Blue Ridge lawyer did a fantastic job advocating for her client, a mother who won full custody of her two children. This was about as black-and-white a case as I ever expect to see; the good guys clearly won. I'd gotten to help a little bit with some evidence and sit in on a couple meetings leading up to the hearing. I admired the respectful, supportive lawyer-client relationship. The lawyer empowered the client to navigate the legal process, and the client did her part diligently. Having access to free legal services made a world of difference for this family. Now both children can live with their mother in a safe, supportive household.

Legal aid organizations like Blue Ridge serve as a lifeline for people who would otherwise be unable to afford legal services.



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Update 2: I'm having a great summer, but looking forward to returning to University of Richmond School of Law. Now I'm three weeks in at Blue Ridge Legal Services, Inc. and it's time for my second EJA Fellow Update:

I should probably explain what “legal aid” is. I didn't know a year ago. Legal aid organizations provide free or low-cost civil legal services to low-income and at-risk communities. They are basically the civil law analogs of public defenders, with one major difference: since U.S. law now recognizes an indigent person's right to counsel in criminal cases, the government has to fund public defenders. There is no such guarantee for civil cases, even though the law can be just as arcane and the stakes are often high.

The availability of legal aid varies wildly by location. Funding typically comes from a combination of government grants, nonprofit organizations, and private donations. Legal aid organizations can also coordinate with local firms willing to take cases pro bono (“for the [public] good”). Since legal aid offices operate on frugal budgets, their attorneys cannot expect the sort of high salaries and stately offices they'd likely get in private practice. They willingly make that sacrifice because they want to help those in need.

So far, the lawyers at Blue Ridge seem to be everything I'd hoped they would be – talented, compassionate, and dedicated to serving others. What I did not anticipate was how much they do besides law. They are also



problem-solvers, coaches, mediators, and patient listeners. Next week, for example, my most important task will be helping a client who is anxious and overwhelmed gather the documents we need for her case. My Friday “research” included how to replace vehicle registration stickers online. I appreciate working at a place that meets people where they are, even when that means simply walking them through the DMV’s computer system.

More adventures to come!

Update 3: Fall semester at the University of Richmond School of Law starts in about a week, but I’m still finishing up my second internship, at Blue Ridge Legal Services, Inc.

Time for my penultimate EJA Fellow Update, brought to you by Equal Justice America.

After this busy summer, I’m feeling worn out. Honestly, I’d expected legal aid to be the easier internship. Not so! Today’s topic: clients.

Working with law clients is an experience I’d never had before. It can be exhausting. I went to law school to help people in need, but until this summer “people in need” was mostly just an abstract concept in my mind – indistinct and generic, like a crowd viewed from a distance. Now I have a few faces and stories to fill my mental picture. I’ve genuinely liked all the clients I’ve met this summer.

I’m learning that real clients’ problems rarely involve the sort of interesting legal questions we read about in our 1L casebooks. I’ve also seen that legal aid lawyers rarely have the luxury to reserve long blocks of time for research and writing. They’re busy with the constant urgent tasks for their many cases – communicating with the parties, coaching clients through next steps, appearing in court, and being sure to file the right paper with the right clerk at the right time.

It seems to be the nature of legal aid work that emergencies and unexpected challenges pop up frequently. A new client will call the afternoon before an eviction hearing the next morning. Another will call every day to tell the same long story. Many clients are hard to get in touch with, and getting people to bring documents can be a struggle. I’ve been impressed by the Blue Ridge lawyers’ patience, professionalism, and concern for each of their clients, even the difficult ones.

Update 4:

Wow, that last week zoomed by. Classes have already started at University of Richmond School of Law, so it’s past time to submit my last EJA Fellow Update for Equal Justice America.

My last day at Blue Ridge Legal Services, Inc. ended up being the most interesting. I got to go to the Harrisonburg General District Court with my supervisor, Betzi, who had two cases that day. I just sat in the back pew of the courtroom and observed. I’d never observed district court at all and knew nothing about court proceedings. (I really need to take VA Procedure!) Betzi had to explain to me what the sessions were: two first returns and one motion hearing.



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For the returns, I was surprised that everyone with a given time slot just went into the courtroom as a group and waited while the judge went through the cases. I'd imagined people would have more privacy. The atmosphere was also more casual than I expected, and I was surprised that nearly everyone was pro se. The judge seemed fair, though stern, and he did an admirable job of working with the pro se litigants.

My overall impression was that court is SAD. At least half of the cases involved landlords wanting to evict tenants who couldn't pay rent. Since I'd been working to help tenants all summer – first from a policy perspective at the Gov Office and then on the ground at legal aid – it was jarring to see real landlords as plaintiffs. They were hurting from the pandemic too. One lady was facing foreclosure because her tenant had not paid rent for months and refused to leave. She broke down crying when the judge declared that since the tenant had just filed a form with the court indicating that he would apply for the Rent Relief Program the case had to be continued for another month. I had reviewed that same provision while at the Governor's Office and applauded legal aid's use of it. It was sobering to see the other side. The Rent Relief Program should be paying the landlords, but the funds are not being disbursed quickly enough. There just aren't any easy solutions.

The main reason I'd come to court was to observe Betzi in her hearing. That ended up being more eventful than expected. I got to see two seasoned lawyers present well-developed oral arguments on a matter that could have gone either way depending on the judge. Fortunately, this judge stuck to the plain language of the law, and Betzi clearly won the case. After the judge left, however, I witnessed a bizarre violation of professional responsibility that I will never forget. Betzi, by contrast, maintained a professional and respectful demeanor the entire time and made sure that her clients did the same. I can't say more, but that was probably the most memorable moment of my internship. If I ever start to lose my temper in a courtroom, I will recall that incident and try to emulate Betzi's self-control.

Overall, working at Blue Ridge this summer was a wonderful experience. Legal aid lawyers are incredible people! Honestly, though, I'll have to think more about whether I have the fortitude to join them.

That's all, folks!