



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid & Jane's Due Process

Update 1:

I am now in the fourth week of my five weeks with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, and I cannot believe how quickly it has flown by. I have gotten to work on cases ranging from multi-year-long litigation in civil rights and educational rights to quick torts cases. During my time here, I have completed four legal research projects, a non-legal research project on settlement demands, and I am currently working on drafting part of a response to a motion for summary judgment. I am so impressed with the attorneys I am working with. They are clearly overworked and underappreciated, but they still have so much heart and kindness to give to their clients and to clerks! I have worked on projects directly with three different attorneys (not including the 7 or so others that are on cases I am working on), and they are very open about the realities of working in civil legal aid—long hours, tons of cases, compassion and disaster fatigue, the difficulty of certain cases, client's distrust of institutions (including aid organizations), and the difficulty of turning clients away clients when they simply do not have the resources. Today, an attorney and I were discussing how the motion for summary judgment we are responding to was likely an attempt to quickly sue someone and get money based on the expectation that our client would not have an attorney. It really highlighted the way lack of access to counsel can make people more vulnerable to being taken advantage of. I am noticing the tough balance between maximizing impact on the community by helping as many as possible with preserving enough, compassion, and resources to maintain efficiency and effectiveness. I am excited to see what the next week and a half has in store before I move on to my next internship, working more directly with clients; the small amount of client interaction I have had so far has been very rewarding. I am eager to see how a more research/litigation role compares to direct services at a smaller organization.

Update 2:

Last Friday I completed my internship with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, and I have now begun my internship with Jane's Due Process a non-profit that helps minors access reproductive healthcare, including helping them through the judicial bypass process. My time at TRLA ended with one of my favorite projects to have worked on. I researched different ways to challenge an administrative procedure for certain environmental justice hearings. The research was engaging, and I was able to utilize legal analysis skills I learned during 1L to advise the attorneys. The five weeks went by so quickly. It was strange to leave so many projects with no closure as to how they'll turn out, and to transition to a new organization all within the span of a couple days. Now at JDP, I am



going through the training process for working with teenagers, survivors of abuse and violence, and learning background about the bypass process in Texas. While confidentiality was a big concern at TRLA, it is even more so a concern with the judicial bypass as the client's identity has to be absolutely protected, even from the record, and the judge's identity must be protected also. A theme I am seeing from both organizations is the difference between direct services and impact litigation. For example, JDP does not do impact litigation, they aim to help their individual clients achieve whatever outcome the client believes is best for them and does not use the cases to achieve greater changes in the law. This is something TRLA also discussed—that lawyers have to be careful and mindful of how they bring those larger challenges because you want to ensure you don't exploit or jeopardize your client's case or create bad precedent for others. To avoid a negative situation, it is important for attorneys to consult with other organizations in the state to strategize how/if to appeal a case. It is a very important consideration that I had not thought of before!

Update 3:

In my third week now at Jane's Due Process, I have been trained on both the text and phone hotline, have worked shifts on both and done intakes with minors seeking our help. This one-on-one contact with clients has been very rewarding, but also challenging. It serves as a powerful reminder of how hard it can be to access rights and services, especially if you are living in poverty, immigrated here, or are under 18. Pairing these experiences with the current special legislative session in Texas is even more frustrating because I am realizing how out of touch politicians are with peoples' actual needs (like comprehensive sex education!). They're working to make it even harder for people in Texas to access abortion care when there are plenty of barriers as is. I have also begun to realize the hypocrisy more fully behind the laws. For example, a minor who is already a mom is able to consent to her child's medical care but not her own. Except, a pregnant minor can consent to all pre-natal healthcare except accessing an abortion should she decide that is the best option. With where the law currently is in Texas, we are still able to help young women and other people seeking abortion access. When a teenage mom calls terrified and overwhelmed because she is pregnant again and can't afford a child or an abortion and doesn't know where her parents are—we are able to help her, to make her life just a little bit less stressful and scary. That is so incredibly rewarding, but also makes daily life hearing about all the impending abortion bans that much more aggravating.

Update 4:

Throughout my summer working in public interest, the biggest lesson I have learned is sustainability. Many people who dedicate their lives to helping others also have a hard time setting boundaries—knowing when to say no, shut off their computer, and find joy in their own lives. However, some of the people I worked with this summer made very intentional effort to set these boundaries, and it made their work more effective and sustainable, prioritizing preventing burn out. This is something I will definitely carry forward with me—the understanding that sometimes you actually have to do less work in order to do better work and get more done. Additionally, the organizations I worked with really tried to make their clients voices matter. Rather than speaking for their clients, they amplified the voices of their clients speaking for themselves. In legal aid work, this was important because many clients who had been marginalized did not trust legal institutions. At Jane's Due Process, it was important to ensure that advocacy work truly reflected the experiences of those we were helping. These were my biggest takeaways from this summer, and I am interested to see how I can carry these lessons into my schoolwork and future legal work.