



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: University of Wisconsin Law School

Organization: Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee

Update 1:

I'm grateful for Equal Justice America's support as I return to work at the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee this summer in their Consumer and Housing Divisions. During the COVID-19 pandemic last summer, my work centered around housing issues as evictions rose astronomically during that time, even by Milwaukee standards.

Since I arrived on May 14th, eviction filings have remained relatively low compared to last summer and I have been helping defend consumers from debt collectors, garnishors, and some unsavory car dealerships, in addition to helping with housing work. I have also been interviewing inmates in the Milwaukee County Jail and House of Correction to ascertain compliance with a nearly 20-year-old consent decree that Legal Aid helped negotiate as class action counsel, improving conditions and medical/dental/mental health care. Lastly, I traveled to a prison to interview an inmate sentenced to a *de facto* life without parole sentence for a crime committed at 16 as part of a collaboration with the Milwaukee DA's office to determine early release eligibility in compliance with *Miller—Montgomery*.

Lawyers experience vicarious trauma in nearly every setting and our clients have been dealt their fair share of struggles long before they find themselves facing eviction, or facing an unorganized debtbuyer for a nonexistent debt, for example. It's already been a long summer and it will only get longer as the CDC Eviction Moratorium is lifted and anxious landlords begin evicting vulnerable tenants once again. I urge you to consider supporting Equal Justice America.

Update 2:

Good morning everyone! I'm grateful for your support so far this summer. I'm so fortunate to have so many generous family members and friends who have contributed to my fundraiser to help civil legal aid organizations across the country. If you haven't done so already, I urge you to consider supporting Equal Justice America.



Since I last posted, the CDC extended the eviction moratorium through the month of July. All signs are that this will be the last extension. Anticipating a flood of filings in August, the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors passed a measure providing counsel for residents facing eviction or facing foreclosure.

In terms of my work, yesterday I submitted a report to the DA on a juvenile offender discussing his eligibility for early release. I will likely be presenting this report to the DA later in the summer. On the consumer front, I thought I had a pretty good grasp on the range of deceptive marketing techniques and scams. But nearly every week, there's some new thing that knocks my socks off. On the housing front, I will soon be appearing on behalf of tenants facing eviction in housing court. I'm looking forward to helping consumers get relief, and to helping defend tenants. Please consider donating to EJA. Your donation is twofold: (1) It helps me do my work directly and (2) helps EJA fund other law students in unpaid work throughout the country.

Update 3:

Hello everyone! I'm grateful to all of my generous family members and friends who have contributed to my fundraiser. I'm also indebted to Equal Justice America, who has graciously provided me with funding to help cover my living expenses this summer. Please consider making a donation to support Equal Justice America if you haven't done so already.

I have a feeling most other past and present EJA fellows will agree with what I've written below. For the most part, working at the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee this summer (and last) has been engaging, rewarding, and just plain fun. You can't beat the feeling when your hard work pays off to achieve results for clients in dire straits. But sometimes, those feelings of accomplishment and pride are capricious and fickle. There's an equally defeating flipside when you have to turn someone away, or break the news that despite your best efforts, there's no legal path forward. I broke this news to a woman facing eviction, largely due to her decompensation into an abusive, drug-dependent relationship. I told a tearful woman we could not help her with her veterinarian debts, even though they were incurred to relieve the suffering of animals she was sheltering out of the goodness of her heart.

At times, it's tough to bear these conversations. You can expect the person on the other side of the phone to break down, and you can certainly expect to learn new four-letter words. As the Dalai Lama says, "empathy is the most precious human quality." I believe civil legal aid practitioners can take solace in the fact that they have heard and given the person in front of them a fair shake, prioritizing empathy in the conversation. Although we can't help everyone, we can leave everyone with whom we speak with a frank assessment of their case delivered with empathy and respect.



Entry 4:

In two weeks, I will wrap up my summer work with the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee (“Legal Aid”). This summer was a productive and transformative one for me, and for Legal Aid in general. I appeared in court, travelled to correctional facilities, worked directly with clients to build their cases, and even dipped my feet into some statistical analysis using R. While I certainly honed my “hard skills” this summer by drafting motions and researching tough questions (e.g., when landlords deny a tenant’s rental application because of an eviction filing, regardless of any mitigating circumstances, are they violating the FHA by engaging in a practice that disparately impacts protected classes?), I drastically improved my “soft skills” with clients. Trust, empathy, and humor are key. You can treat client interactions like depositions to get the information you need. But a cold tone can turn your client off and harm the representation. Asking open ended questions and responding with empathy is not just the right thing to do, it opens up informational avenues you didn’t know you needed in the first place.

Legal Aid is growing as well. We have been charged with implementing the Right to Counsel initiative passed by the County Board (<https://urbanmilwaukee.com/pressrelease/county-executive-david-crowley-signs-right-to-counsel-into-law/>) and are busy hiring lawyers to staff the program and increase its reach throughout Milwaukee County. The changing landscape surrounding coronavirus variants and the distribution of COVID relief benefits means that civil legal aid organizations need your support more than ever. Please consider donating to support those working in legal aid.