



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia

Update 1:

As I close out my first two weeks as an intern with the Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia (LASEV), I am struck by the courage, confidence, and dedication of the legal aid staff. The words that come to mind as I think about this commitment are those that I have heard many times, "showing up is half the battle." A founding principle of LASEV's mission is to remove impediments to fairness for low-income and vulnerable families in eastern Virginia. In just two short weeks, I have witnessed LASEV attorneys show up for their clients and embrace this mission daily.

On my first day, I waited outside the courtroom with my supervisor for his client, she never came. This unexpected hiccup did not deter the attorney from pursuing justice for this client, securing a continuance so that she could remain safe under a protective order. On a separate occasion, a client's phone was disconnected, the attorney went to great lengths to connect with the client but was unsuccessful. In one last attempt, before an agreement was due, the attorney showed up at the client's house to secure a signature so that the case could move forward.

Many clients served by LASEV experience barriers that prevent them from attending proceedings or advocating for themselves. Throughout the last two weeks, I have been inspired by the commitment, strength, and dedication of the LASEV staff. Showing up means late nights, advocating for clients who cannot make the court appearance, going out of the way to secure signatures, and working tirelessly to remove impediments for clients. Showing up is half the battle, but without these attorneys and their commitment to justice and advocacy, the legal battle cannot be won. Over the next few weeks, I cannot wait to learn, observe, and witness how the LASEV attorneys continue to fight legal battles on behalf of their clients.



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Update 2:

The attorneys at LASEV are a large piece of a very complex puzzle. Still, once a client's legal issue is solved, clients often face other challenges related to housing, finances, mental health, and familial difficulties. Unfortunately, not all challenges can be solved by LASEV. In these instances, clients rely on partnerships that LASEV has built with other organizations whose collective mission is to improve the overall lives of those they serve.

I have observed two organizations in action supporting LASEV clients beyond the courtroom. One key partner organization is the Equal Justice Works Housing Fellowship Program which includes an attorney and community outreach specialist who work directly with residents to secure safe, sanitary, and affordable housing.

Week after week, hundreds of residents fight unlawful detainers. While some are represented by legal aid attorneys, most represent themselves creating an urgent need for support. The housing fellows work tirelessly to fill this gap by facilitating weekly outreach hours at the local library, attending housing and redevelopment board meetings, engaging residents at local gatherings, walking door to door, providing "Know Your Rights" literature, and partnering with other community organizers such as EmPower All. The support these organizations offer to LASEV clients is essential because clients have access to resources that will help them secure safe and affordable housing while also helping them improve their quality of life and overall well-being.

Unfortunately, many LASEV clients face eviction and owe thousands of dollars in back rent. When no more legal remedies exist, clients often lose their homes and access to future public housing. Thankfully, the United Way organization is another crucial partner that steps in to help LASEV clients with financial difficulties.

I attended several dockets with United Way Court Navigator Krystal Gary, who waited patiently for each case to be heard so that she could assist renters who received judgments against them. Krystal was able to secure funds for a young woman who had no other options. As Krystal informed the young woman of the payment, I could see the relief take over and the stress dissipate. This blessing gave this young woman a second chance and security, knowing she would not be evicted.

As I close out this first month, I continue to be inspired and encouraged by the LASEV staff and their dedication to our community. Their commitment to solving complex and challenging legal and societal issues can be seen both inside and outside the courtroom, and I am excited to see what the rest of the summer brings.

Update 3:

A client, a few years younger than I, began explaining a heart wrenching diagnosis. My emotions caught me by surprise, and my eyes filled with tears because I was unprepared for the pain and sadness the client felt while sharing the story. The client worked various jobs before the pandemic and lived a healthy life. Sadly, the pandemic led to job loss and the diagnosis. Amid the chaos, the client became homeless and faced an unknown future. Thankfully, the client found the LASEV staff at a monthly outreach event.

The client needed help with Social Security benefits. At this point, the LASEV staff stepped in with compassion to help this client fight this legal battle. The LASEV Norfolk office has a Disability Rights Unit



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and a National Homeless Law Center Justice Fellow dedicated to helping clients with similar legal issues. With the right legal tools, knowledge, and experience, I know that this client's voice will be heard. With the help of persistent attorneys, I pray that this hurdle is removed, allowing the client to focus on health and housing needs instead of financial instability.

This client's story is one of many. The LASEV staff work daily to help clients navigate the Social Security system. Clients who apply for Social Security often face challenges that make it difficult to receive a favorable outcome. With the dedicated team at LASEV, clients have support and encouragement as they wade through the complex system which often results in a successful claim.

Update 4:

After finishing the last week of my internship, I began reflecting on the previous eight weeks. My mind drifted to the hours I spent observing court proceedings, to dozens of clients I met inside and outside of the courtroom, to client home visits, to listening to clients share their challenges at weekly library outreach events, to the building that houses LASEV staff, and to the four attorneys, Jamesa Parker, Timothy Allison, David Likavec, and Taequan Kates, to the housing fellow DeAnna Smith, and the office assistant, Toni Fields. As the images blurred and days ran together, I realized that the last eight weeks have been inspiring, challenging, and, most importantly, reaffirmed my decision to become a lawyer.

Initially, finding the words and thoughts to express what I experienced over the last eight weeks was difficult. When I started in May, I did not realize how much of an impact the last few weeks would have on my inner dialogue about the kind of lawyer I want to be. Truthfully, I have known that I wanted to be a lawyer since I was twelve, but I never fully understood why or what drew me to the profession. I had never known a lawyer beyond brief acquaintances; my parents were not lawyers, none of my friends were lawyers, nor extended family. There was an indescribable call to go to law school. For many years, I pushed it away, filled my days with teaching, mothering, and serving others. Once I could no longer deny my calling, I embraced it and went to law school.

During my 1L year, I still could not quite understand what drew me to law school until two months ago when I met the selfless and dedicated attorneys at the legal aid office. It was the first time I experienced lawyering in action in a way that made my heart smile, and my soul feel at home. For the team of lawyers and support staff at LASEV, legal advocacy is not about money or pats on the back. It is about making a genuine difference in the lives of people in the community. I finally realized that their passion and commitment to advocacy matched mine and is the reason why I want to be a lawyer. Simply put, I want to advocate for others who need help.

Working with the LASEV staff taught me that being a legal aid attorney takes grit, perseverance, creativity, and commitment. From my perspective, the work is worth the reward and the blessings bestowed upon clients daily. As the summer begins to fade and the Fall semester comes into focus, I cannot wait to get back to work so that one day, I, too, can bless others through advocacy as a lawyer.