

Thanks to the generosity of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation, I was able to spend this past summer as an Investigator Intern at the Legal Aid Society in New York City, which is a nonprofit organization contracted to serve as New York City's public defender and is the oldest and largest provider of legal services to the indigent. While there are alternative defender organizations such as the Neighborhood Defender Service and The Bronx Defenders, the Legal Aid Society handles the vast majority of New York City's indigent cases – my administrators this summer estimated a statistic of approximately 80 percent. The Society, which handles civil and juvenile cases in addition to criminal ones, has offices in all five boroughs, and I was assigned to the Queens office's criminal defense practice for the summer, where my job was to assist staff investigators and attorneys with fact investigation and trial preparation for their clients.

We began with a week-long training at the Society's headquarters in downtown Manhattan, which was designed with two major purposes in mind: to give us background on the criminal justice system, especially in the state of New York, and to give us strategies to utilize when out investigating cases. Peter Mitchell, the Director of Training for the Criminal Defense Division, walked us through the former, highlighting important penal codes, common theories of defense, and relevant constitutional law. A variety of other staff members at the Society, including the two coordinators of the Investigator Internship program, gave us extremely in-depth practice dealing with a variety of potential scenarios, such as having to interview a complaining witness when our client is present or having to interview a reluctant witness. There were also several guest speakers who highlighted some new developments in the Society's work, such as an attorney who explained how new DNA forensic technology helped acquit her client in one of her recent cases. We were also lucky enough to attend an orientation at the Skadden Law

Firm, which provides a significant amount of pro bono work to the Society, where high-ranking members of the Society, such as the Attorney in Charge of the Criminal Practice and the President, spoke to us about our upcoming summer and the importance of the Society's work.

After that week concluded, we began reporting to our respective boroughs. I shadowed investigators for the first full week on the job in order to garner a sense of how professionals conducted themselves in real time, as opposed to the simulations we had done in training that only approximated the process. When the second week commenced, I was able to start working on my own. I worked directly under two investigators, Andrea Cherry and Tyron Pope, both of whom were former corrections officers. Ms. Cherry and Mr. Pope were the designed investigators for the set of lawyers whose offices were just down the hall from theirs on the second floor. Using the Society's internal database, the attorneys submit investigation requests to the investigators regarding any necessary work they need done in order to flesh out their theories of defense. The investigators would then pass on the requests for cases regarding misdemeanor charges to me, as interns were not allowed to investigate felonies for liability reasons, although as the summer progressed, I started receiving investigation requests from the attorneys themselves.

Most commonly, the attorneys requested the following kinds of work: canvassing for and obtaining video surveillance of the incident, canvassing for and interviewing witnesses to the incident (including taking statements), photographing the location of the incident, and internet/social media investigations into relevant parties. Occasionally, we would be required to do a variety of other miscellaneous activities, such as serve documents to our clients or investigate certain neighborhoods for suspicious activities. We were required to investigate cases with a partner, again for liability reasons, so my partner, an intern who attends Carleton College,

and I would always go out together on cases, which spanned the entirety of the Queens borough. In total, we worked on 62 cases over the summer.

Although I am prohibited from discussing the details of my cases due to the necessity of confidentiality regarding active cases, some of the cases I worked on will stick with me for the rest of my life. I successfully ensured that a homeless client made his court date by delivering a letter from his attorney, which I translated into Spanish, to a church that provides food for the homeless. I located an underage client who ran away from home. One major victory occurred late on Friday afternoon, when I was able to use my admittedly slightly broken Spanish to convince one complaining witness to drop the charges against my client. But on a more disheartening note, I interviewed dozens of people who were pressing charges against their own family members because they simply wanted those members to receive psychiatric help and were unsure of any other method to force them to do so. I listened to several people recount the events that had led them to press charges in the first place, which ran the gamut from childhood molestation to alcoholism to mental illness to homelessness to gang violence to the deaths of close friends. I was reminded of how lucky I am to come from a place and attend a university where those phenomena are by and large unheard of, and these one-on-one interactions all the more cemented my desire to attend law school to practice in the public interest.

As a supplement to our investigative work, I was also able to learn in other ways about the legal system, specifically the criminal justice system, throughout my summer at the Society. I began each day with a meeting with the office's supervising attorney and the legal interns. The supervising attorney would check in with each intern, both investigative and legal, about our respective caseloads and would inform us of other opportunities available to us, such as lectures on certain kinds of legal proceedings. These meetings, in addition to being a nice update on what

the rest of the intern class was doing, in particular allowed me to get a sense of the kinds of work that legal interns were able to do, such as writing and filing motions and, occasionally, second-seating some of the attorneys at arraignments or trial. In particular, being able to socialize with the legal interns allowed me to ask questions about the process of applying to and attending law school, as well as specifically about the process of attending law school with the intention of practicing public interest law. Moreover, on slower days when there were no new misdemeanors investigations available, we were able to observe trial proceedings at the nearby Queens courthouse, where we saw prosecution witnesses get directly and cross-examined, a judge hand down a verdict, and a judge hand down a sentence.

From the week of training to being out in the field to just conversing with the incredibly talented attorneys and investigators in the Queens office, I feel so much more confident in both my commitment to public interest law and to the concept of justice as a whole, having interacted and amassed an intimate familiarity with people and communities the likes of which I know I never would have encountered in my privileged bubble. I could not be more grateful for the opportunity I was afforded this summer in the form of this internship, and in turn, to the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for its role in making it possible.