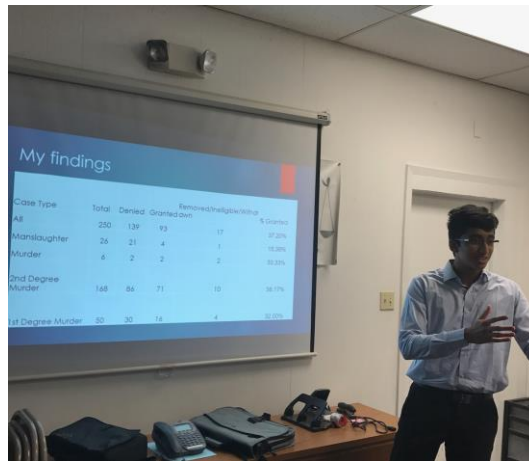


Final Report—Vignesh Valliyur



Me presenting to the office

Picking up from where I left off in my last report, I want to write about some of the experiences I have had since then. I had the opportunity of visiting one of the LCAC's clients who was being held in a parish prison while he was awaiting trial. I accompanied one of the attorneys to the prison, and spoke to the client. That interaction was incredibly poignant, and I was able to see the emotional and physical toll a pending capital case takes on a person. Our conversation was a mix of case specific information and general conversation, and we took great care to help keep our client in good spirits. However, my prison visit emphasized an important principle – the client is the most important person in the case. The attorneys at the LCAC do everything in their power to provide the best possible defense for the person they are representing, but in order to do so, they need the person's cooperation. The client can really help the attorney defend them as they offer critical insight into their past that will inform penalty phase preparation. And sometimes, the best defense may involve taking a plea deal. In order for the client to accept the deal, they have to have faith in their attorney and truly believe that they are pursuing the best defense. However, these productive attorney client relationships aren't always a given. Some clients may have had bad experiences with past lawyers, and as a result don't trust the attorney who is now trying to save their life. Other clients may be mentally ill and therefore unable to help the attorney with their case. The only way to overcome these challenges is to do everything possible to build a strong relationship (even in cases in which the client suffers from a mental illness or intellectual disability). The LCAC visits their clients every week and with each visit, the case may be strengthened and crucial trust is built. But the LCAC does not stop there; they do everything they can to make the client as comfortable as possible. For example, I have seen attorneys drive across Louisiana for hours in order to facilitate a family prison visit. The attorneys also purchase books and other items that will help the clients while they are in prison and they keep in touch with some of their clients even after they no longer represent them.

The LCAC also acts as a resource office, consulting with defenders handling capital cases around Louisiana. It has assisted many lawyers in the region at every stage, particularly in those parishes where the death penalty is used most aggressively. Over the years the LCAC has litigated what seems like an infinite list of issues, and thus has an expansive motions library. Using all this experience and more, they assist with case theory development, pre-trial litigation, jury selection, Atkins litigation, penalty phase preparation, and mid-trial writ

writing. Over the summer, I was responsible for developing an online resource bank to make their motion library accessible to the Louisiana defense community. This project required me to go through a variety of capital trial motions, format them and design and code several webpages. This task was really interesting for it taught me some of the basics about litigation. I was intrigued by some of the motions that I read, and I followed that up by asking the attorneys about their motion drafting process. I found myself constantly looking up the cases I read about, asking attorneys what certain terms meant and reading up on the basics of legal writing. With regards to my project about Louisiana Pardon Board that I mentioned in my last report, I was able to continue refining my dataset. After, I consolidated my findings, I gave a presentation to the entire office about my work. That was certainly one of the highlights of my Summer. I enjoyed battling the nerves, putting together the presentation filled with some jokes (hopefully they were funny) and answering questions. The presentation and the subsequent discussion actually raised some questions that needed further work.

My time at the LCAC was all I that hoped it would be. I got the chance to meet amazing people, see the criminal justice system with my own eyes and play a role in combatting the death penalty. I now have a more nuanced understanding of the system wide problems that plague the criminal justice system. For example, I now know how race may play a role in jury selection, what capital error rates might mean, examples of ineffective assistance of counsel, how Montgomery cases work and much more. When I learnt about each of these issues in detail I felt the same sense of shock and wonder that I felt when I first learnt about the concept of capital punishment all those years ago. And without a doubt, all of these learning experiences have only calcified my desire to learn more. Apart from the academic and legal eureka moments, I often found myself feeling humbled and grateful for the relative gifts I have been given. Some of my casework was filled with gut wrenching stories, and gory details that filled me with sadness and feelings of relief. It made me look at other associated issues like poverty, domestic violence, mental illness and schooling practices in a new light. I am incredibly thankful for the effort that the LCAC took to make this internship as enriching as possible for the interns. We were pushed to ask questions, served as audience members to several fantastic brown bag presentations and were given an endless supply of free peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (no points for guessing what my daily breakfast was). While I only worked at the LCAC for a few months, I will remember what I learnt for quite some time. I am still passionate about criminal law and hope to pursue a career in criminal defense in the future.



THANK YOU LCAC!