

Interim Report

Laura Taylor

Tennessee Justice Center Client Advocate Internship

Over the last four weeks, I have worked as a client advocate intern for the Tennessee Justice Center in Nashville, Tennessee. Throughout my experiences thus far, I have had the incredible opportunity and privilege to work with many Tennesseans in their effort to secure access to healthcare, particularly through the Medicaid system.

Throughout my young adult life, I have become increasingly interested in advocacy work. This interest was fostered as I entered university, where I chose to take classes that focused on America's historical and sociological progression. This path gave me opportunities such as learning alongside inmates at a local prison, completing university-level research about the history of my university, and taking classes with professors who are incredibly passionate about social justice research and work. It was through these opportunities that I decided to combine my interest in advocacy with my career path, and I particularly sought out social justice movements that I could become involved in. When I was given the opportunity to work at the Tennessee Justice Center (TJC) as a client advocate, I was thrilled to be able to work in the healthcare field with a non-profit organization that advocates for those who often need healthcare the most.

My experience at the TJC becomes more meaningful when the state of healthcare in Tennessee is fully understood. Tennessee is one of the 17 states in the U.S. that has not expanded Medicaid since the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010. This means that Tennessee residents who are not children, parents, or those deemed disabled by the Social Security

Administration and whose yearly income falls below the federal poverty line do not receive coverage. This coverage gap affects some of the most marginalized groups within the state of Tennessee and perpetuates class lines and divisions among races as well. The purpose of the Tennessee Justice Center when it was founded over two decades ago was to help Tennessee families access healthcare and other basic necessities. The TJC accomplishes this by advocating for these families at both an administrative and a legislative level. This is still the purpose of the TJC, and the focus of the company in the present day is to bring fairness to the healthcare system in Tennessee and to advocate for the expansion of Medicaid. My role within the non-profit has been to represent the TJC's clients to Tennessee's Medicaid system, TennCare.

On my first day at the Tennessee Justice Center, I was surprised by the amount of responsibility I was given. I learned within the day how to complete client intakes and had been assigned a few of my own cases. I also began learning how to screen clients through the TJC's own screening process, AskJane, to see what government healthcare plans our clients might be eligible for. Although the TJC only employs roughly two dozen full-time employees, there are about 16 summer interns at the TJC for the summer, including undergraduate and legal interns who work in every department of the company. This means that the TJC is able to increase the number of clients represented throughout the summer. I have represented over a dozen clients in my time here so far, ranging from mothers with toddler-aged children to elderly and disabled Tennesseans who need assistance navigating governmental healthcare.

Because the TJC has a relatively low number of employees and a relatively high number of clients, I have been able to learn directly from all of the company's attorneys and healthcare experts, both in our weekly casework meetings and through one-on-one consultations regarding my cases. All interns at the TJC are also assigned a mentor whom they can go to with questions

or for advice. My mentor Rob is an attorney who has worked at the TJC for years. He is the primary developer of the TJC's client screening program AskJane. While working with him, I have gained experience in many of the technical aspects of TennCare's screening process. This hands-on experience has allowed me to learn the technicalities of Tennessee's Medicaid manuals, and this knowledge has translated into my casework. I have also learned how to compile appeals to TennCare, which includes strategizing with clients, figuring out the best way to secure some form of coverage for those who are eligible, compiling documents and researching the information needed for different types of appeals, and writing explanatory letters using legal writing skills that I am developing with the help of my mentor and other staff attorneys.

The Tennessee Justice Center provides important information about TennCare and any changes to regulations through webinars available to healthcare groups and intern training sessions. I have already taken three intern training sessions, which were a legal notetaking seminar, a TennCare policy seminar, and a U.S. healthcare history seminar, which was taught by a TJC staff attorney who also teaches a poverty law seminar at Vanderbilt Law School. These seminars provided insight into how to better manage my cases but also armed me with information about how the healthcare system in the U.S. has changed and become increasingly difficult to navigate. The TJC is a way to help Tennesseans navigate this system, and learning about the history of our healthcare has helped me understand how essential our work is. Along with these intern sessions, I have also sat in on three of TJC's webinars, which covered how to navigate TennCare's new online application TEDS, likely changes to the definition of a public charge proposed by the Trump administration which affect access to healthcare, and how pregnant women can gain TennCare coverage. These seminars have given me further insight into

how policy changes are intentional and often harm many who need care most and how to help my clients apply to TennCare efficiently so that they gain coverage as quickly as possible.

While I have learned a great deal directly from TJC, I have also learned a lot from my clients throughout the past 4 weeks. Many of my cases involve Tennesseans being denied coverage or needing a gap in coverage filled, and these people often are dealing with serious health problems or other financial issues. Giving my clients the opportunity to relay their frustrations and helping lift some of the pressure of their healthcare issues has shown me just how important even one advocate's work can be. One of my clients, who is going through radiation treatment, rarely has the energy to leave their home other than for various doctor's appointments. Hearing the exhaustion in their voice mixed with the optimism of any help I can provide helps me know that the TJC's work is helping people. This particular client is working through a complicated appeal process, and the help from the TJC allows the client to focus more on their health treatments. Many of my clients remain optimistic and positive throughout these issues as well, and their optimism continues to inspire me to work as hard as possible for each person.

Though I have only been at the Tennessee Justice Center for 4 weeks, I have learned from the staff, my fellow interns, and my clients about the power of one advocate. I strongly believe that the U.S. healthcare system needs reform and that justice movements can help propel reform. Because I am passionate about healthcare justice, I believe my work as a client advocate at the TJC not only allows me to further my education on healthcare justice but also help people one at a time gain better access to healthcare. The TJC uses the stories of clients like my own to show how the current state of both Tennessee and U.S. healthcare harms many people, particularly the most marginalized. These stories are used for our policy advocacy as well, which

is important in our campaign for healthcare and Medicaid reform. Being an advocate who hears these stories first and does everything possible to help has shown me just how important these movements are, because without having organizations who work to change the laws that directly prevent citizens from accessing a basic necessity such as healthcare. I am so thankful to have the opportunity to work for such an incredible organization. I truly appreciate the Jessica Jenifer Cohen Foundation for being so generous and making this experience possible.