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Tennessee Justice Center Client Advocate Internship

Over the last 8 weeks, I have spent my days working as a casework and client advocate intern at the Tennessee Justice Center (TJC). TJC is a nonprofit that both advocates for improving healthcare both nationally and in the state of Tennessee and represents clients to the state, helping secure access for Medicaid. There, I primarily worked with Tennesseans to find the best healthcare options for each of my clients. I chose this internship specifically because it provided me the opportunity to work directly with clients in a field that is vital to every American. The healthcare field has always been politicized, as I learned from one of our many training sessions at TJC, but the ever-changing field is currently working against those who need it most, particularly in states that have not expanded Medicaid. Many Tennesseans, along with residents of other states who have not expanded Medicaid like my home state, Oklahoma, have trouble accessing basic healthcare at reasonable rates because of the legislation working against them. Throughout my time at TJC, I worked with over two dozen clients who were put in hard financial situations because of this legislation. The households I represented contained Tennesseans ranging in age from toddlers to great-grandparents, and they each had unique life experiences. However, they were all very similarly affected and disadvantaged by Tennessee's healthcare laws.

Some of my client's yearly income fell below the federal poverty line, meaning that they were unable to receive Medicaid through the state unless they were a parent, caretaker, child, or other special classification. Some of my clients were unenrolled from their healthcare without notice, because the state of Tennessee recently changed their renewal system and many

Tennessee residents were negatively impacted. Some of my clients were living off of meager monthly social security checks and food stamps, but hesitated to seek further financial assistance through other programs because they were afraid to lose certain healthcare benefits if their income became too high. While the exact circumstances and facts of each case varied, one fact about the state's healthcare system became clear: it was broken. Hearing each story revealed new and different cracks in the system, but it was obvious that my job was to try to mend each problem as much as I could and move on to another one. Sometimes these cases were not solvable because the law worked against the client. However, each new story made it clear that the advocacy side of TJC was just as essential as the day-to-day casework of representing clients.

Advocating for the expansion of Medicaid in the state of Tennessee and advocating for the right for individual clients to gain their healthcare access have the same end goal, which is to eliminate the worry of healthcare from the daily lives of United States residents. Many residents have exacerbated stress and ailments from not receiving healthcare, along with a lower life expectancy if they do not have access to healthcare. This means that if the United States were successful in fully making healthcare accessible to all, then not only would the average medical health improve, but the financial and emotional stress of accessing healthcare would be eliminated as well. This stress was evident in nearly all of my cases.

In my interim report, I discussed what I had learned at TJC through our trainings and my day-to-day work. Since then, I have focused almost exclusively on casework, which means that I witnessed issues with Medicaid and Medicare in nearly every facet of their respective systems. Hearing both strength and defeat at different times in each of my clients' voices contributed greatly to my desire to both help them and strive to change the system for them. One client, whom I worked particularly long hours with, had a teenager with cerebral palsy, and they had

both been denied healthcare. As I was working to file an appeal to the state for the client, I heard of the client's recent struggles, which included losing a spouse, working incredibly long hours at their job to cover medical expenses, and traveling to treatments every weekend with their child. This appeal eventually became successful, which was a relief to both myself and my client, and both my client and their child were covered once again. However, the success of that case did not give back any of the time or money that my client had lost before the application process began, which only reinforced my idea that there were gaping holes within the state's healthcare system.

Another of my cases included an elderly client, M, who had just received coverage, but their coverage had not been backdated. Along with that, M was also seeking charity care to waive bills from a local hospital, but the hospital was resisting the appeal for this charity care. This client had dealt with similar problems a few years ago, but the issues then were for their spouse. M was having nearly identical issues, and this was our second time working for the client. While the case is still ongoing and had not reached a resolution by the end of my internship, I did work closely with this client. I filed appeals and researched charity care while speaking with them for hours on the phone over the weeks. I learned about M's life, their autoimmune disorder that had been exacerbated by the stress of these issues, their spouse's worsening health, and candid stories about their young married life, which seemed to be a much happier time in M's life. I believe I learned the most from this case, because it gave me a great deal of insight into the life of my client. It showed me that the problems within the healthcare system are systemic, as the client's spouse had experienced these same issues just a few years earlier, which was clearly documented in TJC's case system. My client had taken precautionary steps to make sure the same thing did not happen again, but despite the carefulness, the problems still arose.

I heard the stress and anxiety in M's voice every time I called them, because they weren't sure if I would be bringing bad news or not. I heard the relief each time I found a new avenue to explore within the case, which meant that there was still hope. On my last day of work, when I finally told M that I would be leaving TJC and introduced her to her new caseworker, they cried on the phone and told me they would miss our conversations and my positive attitude. As I drove home from TJC that day, I got a little misty-eyed too, because I realized just how much clients, especially this one, had meant to me and changed my outlook. The experiences of my clients had become my experiences. I know going forward that my desire to help people like my clients is what will drive my future endeavors.

As I enter into my final semester of undergrad this fall, I plan to pursue continued non-profit work and volunteering near my campus. Before I left TJC, I had exit meetings with the internship coordinator as well as the Chief Operations Officer about potentially returning to TJC as a staff member after I graduate. While I am unsure if this will be my path forward, I do know that this internship has shown me that non-profit work is not only meaningful and worthwhile, but it is the field I want to enter into upon graduation. I plan to attend law school a year or two after graduating with my bachelor's so that I can contribute a higher caliber of work and experience to the non-profit sector. In the meantime, non-profit work will remain close to my heart, and non-profit volunteering will fill my free time. I am so thankful to the Tennessee Justice Center's for providing such a meaningful internship opportunity, particularly my mentor Rob and TJC's Medicaid expert, Jane. I am grateful for the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for financially supporting my desire to work for such a meaningful cause, because without the generous contribution, the experience would not have been possible.