

# LAURA TAYLOR

The Bronx Defenders Internship

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**Laura Taylor**

**Bronx Defenders Legal Internship**

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In my internship with The Bronx Defenders, I have had the opportunity to undergo extensive training, participate in weekly trial skills activities, attend arraignments and court hearings, write a motion that was filed in court, and represent a client in his bail application hearing. First, our orientation included seminars on anti-oppression, community organizing, client intake, holistic defense, criminal defense, family defense, adolescent defense, civil defense, social work, cultural consciousness, and legal research and writing. This training was unlike any training I have had the opportunity to participate in in past jobs or internships, and the organization focused on ensuring that interns were familiarized with not only their own practice group but also the deeper workings of other practices. This knowledge is important because holistic defense, at its core, encompasses the entirety of all the practice groups at the organization, not just criminal defense.

In our weekly trial skills trainings, we have learned about arraignment hearings and storytelling, theme and theory, legal arguments, opening statements, direct and cross examinations, and closing statements. I gave a mock bail argument, mock opening statement, mock examinations, and a mock closing statement before multiple supervisory attorneys and received positive feedback that I seemed ready to practice in court. This feedback throughout the summer empowered my supervisor to allow me to interview a client for his arraignment hearing and represent him in that hearing. Going into this internship, I most wanted to gain more experience working with clients directly and speaking before a judge, and this was a phenomenal opportunity that allowed me to do both. The client also gave me unsolicited positive feedback

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after learning I am an intern with the organization, which felt special and reminded me why I want to be a public defender.

In addition to this experience, I also was able to shadow my supervisor for an entire arraignment shift and also accompany her to multiple court hearings. These hearings included a motion to sever joint defendants, which was premised on a motion that I researched and wrote under the supervision of attorneys. This was one of a few different research and writing projects that I have had the opportunity to engage in so far, and the experience has greatly helped my legal writing skills, as noted by my supervisor.

I have continued to work on writing projects, including a writ of habeas corpus, and I have also continued to shadow my supervisor in court and in arraignment hearings. Additionally, I was also able to attend the organization's annual block party (that was briefly interrupted by rain). The block party was incredibly fun and contributed to my admiration of the organization, as it was clear that the community really regards The Bronx Defenders highly based on their engagement with the party. The party welcomed parents, grandparents, children, former clients, current staff members, and anyone else who wanted to swing by and participate. This party was one of the most enjoyable parts of my internship because it allowed me to see how community-driven the organization is, which is important to me.

For the writ of habeas corpus I wrote, I had the opportunity to speak with a client that is currently detained on Rikers Island. This was an incredibly important task, and hearing his story and experience at Rikers was difficult, but it also reminded me why I want to do this work.

While I don't have high hopes for my motion ensuring my client's release due to the very low percentage of such writs that are granted, I hope that the work that I did will help secure some change in my client's treatment. I also had a very difficult experience in an arraignment interview prior to our client's bail application hearing, in which a client became very frustrated

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with the system and started sharing the details of his very serious trauma and addiction. His complete lack of faith in the criminal legal system returning a just outcome for him reminded me how common it is for people who have interacted with the system to continue to recidivate, reminding me that this is a system that creates trauma and cannot solve trauma. These interactions reminded me of a quote from Danielle Sered, author of *Until We Reckon*: “No one enters violence for the first time by committing it.” This entire internship reminded me that no one comes to the criminal legal system because they’re bad, violent, and dangerous inherently. People are products of their environment and their society, and we cannot eradicate violence by punishing people individually in a structure – the criminal punishment system – that breeds more violence. From my perspective, we must transform the violent conditions that exist, and to do so, we must also limit the number of people who are exposed to such violence.

This is summarily why I want to be a public defender: I believe in harm reduction, and I want to mitigate the harm through direct representation. Obviously public defenders cannot stop our clients from coming into contact with the system, because by the nature of the job, we don’t engage with clients until after they interact with the system. However, we can reframe their narrative and do everything in our power to minimize the amount of exposure our clients have to the system. We can amplify the stories of our clients to show that they are more than what they are accused of, and we can demand as much dignity as possible for them. From this internship, I feel that this conviction only grew stronger for me. I had a phenomenal experience in this role, and I truly hope that the internship will just be a small steppingstone in my larger journey of public defense.