



Yale College
Center for International & Professional Experience

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Summer Fellowship Final Report

I spent this past summer with the Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia. Many of my fellow interns came to this internship with the goal of using it as a platform to explore the realms of law, litigation, and the justice system. I came to this internship with a very different purpose: to serve the residents of the District of Columbia. I am a DC resident and a graduate of the DC Public School system. I felt and still feel compelled to serve the residents of a city – a divided, increasingly gentrifying, and, in many ways, fundamentally unfair city – that has given and taught me so much.

I spent a lot of time, at the federal level, never seeing the impact of the policies I worked on and never engaging with the people I aimed to serve. My past (2018) summer with the Executive Office of the DC Mayor was so different – I worked on the provision of direct homelessness services to DC residents. I came my internship this summer with the goal of continuing that direct service provision to the residents of DC, and the goal of trying to foster even deeper, more longitudinal, and more meaningful direct engagement with DC residents.

To say that I achieved this goal would be an understatement. At the DC Public Defender, my partner and I were assigned to an attorney in the Felony I Trial Division – the division that exclusively handled homicides and child sex abuse cases.

The day-to-day work of the internship was far from easy – we spent our assisting our staff attorney during case litigation and interactions and completing investigative tasks and advocate for our clients facing Class I Felony charges in the District of Columbia Superior Court. We performed investigative tasks for over two dozen different cases, including serving subpoenas, taking legal statements, analyzing body worn camera and surveillance footage, retrieving and reviewing dozens of dockets of court and medical records, and authoring legal and investigative memos for attorneys and judges that were entered into court record.

But, more than anything else, I spent this past summer learning about people. We were invited into so many different homes. We learned about so many family histories. We helped clients buy clothes and find schools. The Public Defender Service of DC is not just a place of litigation; it is a place of love and genuine care for each of the clients it serves. We provided client-centered care – not just legal services – and this care showed through in our successes inside and outside the courtroom, and in the countless handshakes and hugs of thanks that we received from our clients and our clients' families.

Part of my frustration with policy work in the past came from the fact that, in my opinion, it was impossible to become an expert in one isolated area of policy. It was impossible to master education policy, because education policy is inextricably intertwined with so many other spheres of policy – from urban policy to infrastructure to healthcare to childhood trauma and violence to the foster care system and homelessness policy. My work at the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia taught me that this same interwovenness of issues applies to the law, specifically criminal justice law, as well. This past summer, we

specialized in providing client-centered, *wraparound* care. We did not just take care of the client legally – file the right motions, show up in the right courtroom, and collect the right evidence – we made sure that we were doing our best to provide our clients with all the services and help they needed to live their best and most successful lives. We provided single mothers with access to civil attorneys to help them manage their interactions with welfare officers and child custody battles. We connected clients who were undocumented immigrants with immigration lawyers and nonprofits, and educated them on exactly what they should do if they were paid a visit by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers. We made trips to the local Walmart to make sure that our clients would have a set of clothes and a pair shoes when they were released. We connected clients with counseling services, mental health counselors, group homes, homelessness services, and substance abuse therapy and therapists. One of her clients had my attorney listed as her “emergency contact” – not just for legal matters, but for everything: for her son’s school records, her own health records, and even her apartment lease.

An insight that was cemented through my work with Public Defender Service is that almost nothing happens in a vacuum; we live an increasingly interconnected and complicated world, and should approach solving issues (whether policy-, law-, or people-related) knowing that wraparound, holistic evaluations of situations are not just useful, but absolutely necessary.

I came into this internship knowing about the “different faces of DC.” But during the course of my internship, I learned and lived this reality. I spoke with mothers in southeast DC that had endured the incarceration and death of many of their children. For many of our clients, incarceration and tangles with the criminal justice system were inevitabilities. But for other DC residents with a different zip code and skin color, these things are not inevitabilities. The life experiences of children who grow up not four miles away from each other – one in northwest and one in southeast – are indescribably different. In DC, inequality, injustice, and unfairness persists and continues to fundamentally mold the lives of its residents. Through this internship, I learned more about my own home and cemented my desire to serve my city, Washingtonians, and people who continue to face injustice simply because of their identities.

And, before I close, I would like to take a moment to provide sincere thanks to the sponsors of this fellowship. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to immerse myself in an environment of caring and intelligent coworkers, for giving me the opportunity to serve the people that I care about, and for giving me the opportunity to grow and learn so much about how my city serves, or doesn’t serve, many of its residents that look like me.

Public service is never the path of least resistance. It is difficult, heart-wrenching, and oftentimes deeply personal. In my experience in several spheres and levels of public service, I have frankly found this summer’s experience with the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia to be the most difficult. But this work is necessary and integral to our legal system, our criminal justice system, and our country. Our country’s public defender offices need more funding, support, and passionate and hard-working young minds. Our public defenders services need as many students who foster, embody, and are driven by the same spirit of public service that Senator John Heinz exemplified as they can manage to get. Fellowships and funding opportunities like these encourage and enable these such students to serve in the places that need them the most.

I appreciate your willingness to invest in me and my peers as we navigate this world and as we shape the courses of our studies and careers, at Yale and beyond.