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Summer Legal Fellows Reflection Paper
Touro Law Senior Citizen Law Clinic

When I first heard of the program summer legal fellows as a freshman in college, I knew it was something I had to be a part of. I was accepted as a summer legal fellow at Touro Law School, working for the Senior Citizen Law Clinic! However, I never could have imagined the experience I endured once I became a summer legal fellow. Covid-19 allowed my colleagues and I to be the first group of students at Touro Law to experience the fellowship remotely. It was an interesting experience, and it gave me knowledge I will be forever grateful for.

In becoming aware my summer legal fellow experience would be online, I was utterly disappointed. I am eager to study at Touro Law for my graduate degree, so this experience for me was of extreme importance. No one thinks of remote learning in a positive way, and to be honest, I was having a hard time convincing myself that this experience would still be one of a kind, regardless of it being remote or not. After first virtually conversing with my mentor, Avemaria, I knew this experience would be well worth it. She was the most kindhearted and intelligent woman and I knew working alongside her would be well worth my time. I was grateful Avemaria mentored us and decided to let our program live, remotely, as some other fellowship programs were completely cancelled.

The transition to remote learning and working was new for everyone; this was definitely not easy, especially when it came to our fellowship. There were so many technical difficulties in the beginning with Zoom and emailing back and forth. Whether it was Zoom not connecting, or there being confusion over email, it was not easy. The beginning was obviously the hardest, as

remote learning was still in its earliest phases, but we slowly improved as a group. We began to get better conversation through texts and email, and met once in a while on Zoom as well to follow up within our group, and with Dr. Cutler. Though this experience did not happen the way I expected it too, I learned so much.

One of the biggest challenges of working remotely when you have to handle clients, is not having an office phone to use. Since I was working for the senior citizen clinic, our clients were sixty years of age or older. Calling clients to do intake calls or to collect case updates was definitely our biggest hurdle, as we had to call from private numbers since we were calling from our personal cell phones! The biggest issue with calling from private numbers is that senior citizens tend to be hesitant in answering private numbers. Some of them even have a block on their phone lines preventing private callers from reaching them at all. The reason for this is that senior citizens tend to be targets for phone scams, so they do this to prevent themselves. Even the clients that did answer the phone, they would be hesitant to disclose any information till I ensured them I worked for the clinic. The clients needed a lot of reassurance throughout each conversation I had with them; they would do things such as stopping mid-conversation and asking me to remind them my name and where I am calling from again. I didn't mind reassuring them, as you have to have a lot of patience when working with senior citizens.

Another thing I learned while working with senior citizen clients, is that they appreciate just being heard. They do not care if you are able to solve their problem or not, but just the fact that you called to hear about their problem is what they care about. There was one client I did an intake for right at the beginning of my fellowship, and she was the sweetest person I have ever had the opportunity of speaking with. You could tell how genuinely upset she was with the

current landlord/tenant issue she was having, and I was able to feel for her. Typically, in my past experience in working in the legal field, it is best not to sympathize with the client, but I couldn't help it in this scenario. Though I was unable to meet this woman face-to-face, I felt I was speaking with a woman I had known all my life. What made this conversation so memorable to me was her thanking me for the time I spent listening to her speak, and finished it off by saying giving her blessings to me. This is a client I will never forget, and I am so grateful for having the opportunity to speak with her!

Even though I had such a lovely experience with that one particular client, there were some phone calls that, truthfully, were hard to get through. Some clients wanted to rant about their entire life, outside of the situation I had called in regards to. I didn't mind speaking with them, however, it is very hard to get older clients back on track of the current conversation, especially when it is over the phone and not in person. I found this problem to be bigger at the start of my fellowship because as time went on, I began to learn how to route the conversation back to the main point when I endured this type of client.

I had learned so many skills from doing this fellowship, one of which is how to properly do an intake. The intake process is rather easy, but the challenging part is being able to get through the questions you need answered, without drifting into another conversations. Intake have to be done in a timely manner, typically no more than fifteen minutes, and it is a learned skill on how to keep these intake on track. Another skill that I gained from this experience is my researching skills. I had done three different research projects: Governor Cuomo's Safe Harbor Act, Smoking Neighbor Issues, and Foreclosure Protection. It was interesting having to delve through different areas of NY Law and really dig deeper into each topic further than the surface.

My favorite law to research was the Safe Harbor Act because it was something happening in real time due to the coronavirus! I learned that the legislation was put in place to prohibit courts from evicting residential tenants who experienced financial hardship as a result of Covid-19. The support for this bill varied, as people felt differently about whether this bill actually helped people or not. The Safe Harbor Act prevents a court from using unpaid rent that occurred during the Covid-19 period as a basis for non-payment eviction. However, courts are allowed to impose money judgments. Doing this research helped me to be better prepared when speaking to clients!

Working at the Senior Citizen Law Clinic at Touro Law this summer was an experience I will never forget. I have to thank Dr. Cutler for choosing me to take part in this program, and to Avemaria for hosting this program and being a great mentor. I hope to soon be at Touro Law studying and hopefully working in the Senior Citizen Law Clinic sometime again in the near future!