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Siena University Summer Legal Fellows

Reflection Essay

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Touro Law Center Senior Citizens Law Program Reflection

When I first heard that the Summer Legal Fellows application was open, back in February 2025, I figured that I would not apply because I was not a pre-law student and I knew that pre-law students are favored for acceptance into the program. About a week before the deadline, I changed my mind and decided to apply anyway, figuring it could not hurt to try. I created a resume and got two letters of recommendation from my professors – one from Dr. Kevin Baron and one from Dr. Sam Call. I did not have much legal experience when I applied, but I made sure to emphasize the Criminal Legal System class I took while on my Washington Semester at American University and my nonprofit experience in the Bonner Service Leaders Program. I found out about a month later that I had been accepted into Summer Legal Fellows at Touro Law Center, which I was excited about. The location of Touro on Long Island appealed to me, and the work I would be doing involved working with clients directly and making phone calls. I had gained experience doing this kind of work at my internship during my Washington Semester, so I knew I was ready for it.

I worked at Touro in the Senior Citizens Law Program, a clinic specializing in clients who are aged sixty or older. We only dealt with certain types of legal help, including will writing, tenant-landlord disputes, financial struggles, issues with power of attorney, and judgments on property, among others. The other legal fellow at this site was Erika McCarty, and we shared the same days and hours and worked together on calling clients and writing memos. We would also

go to court together for court observations in federal court and district court, and we would watch hearings and trials in both criminal and civil court, pertaining to traffic violations, criminal offenses, and landlord-tenant disputes, among others. We would write a short paper about our observations each time we went to court, which was about once a week. We would hand our observation papers to our supervisor, AveMaria Thompson.

AveMaria is an attorney and law professor at Touro Law Center who assigned us people to call back who had requested legal help from us. She also gave us clients to have will intake forms done for. Filling out a will intake form is the first step in the process of making a will at Touro Law Center. It involves collecting personal information from the client, information about their dependents, their assets, beneficiaries, who they want to be the executor of their will, who they want to be their power of attorney, who they want to be their health care proxy, and who they want to manage their living will. To fill out this form, I would call the client over the phone and ask them the questions in the will intake form. After that, the client would receive a call back from us at a later date to schedule an appointment to come in and create the will, filling out the necessary paperwork.

When calling a client who needs legal assistance other than will-writing, I would call the client and fill out an intake form by asking the client questions. The intake form would ask for personal information, such as the client's name, address, and date of birth, as well as their income and what their specific legal problem is. Once the phone call was complete, Erika would create a memo for the client based on the information they provided. The memo would normally be a one-page paper discussing the client's legal situation and how we can help the client.

On average, Erika and I would spend one day per week in court. We would watch hearings and trials pertaining to traffic court, criminal offenses, family court, and landlord-tenant

court, among other things. One civil case we watched was between a man named Brian Garcia and officers in the Suffolk County Police Department. In 2016, Brian Johnson was pursued by police officers on suspicions he was transporting illegal drugs. He was pulled over when he crossed over the white line on the road. He was then strip-searched by the police officers and the officers asked him if he was an MS-13 gang member, which the officers guessed based on the tattoos on the man's fingers. The officers were sued for unlawful strip searching and alleged racial bias in the incident. Ultimately, a few officers were found to have broken the law and were liable for \$200,000 in punitive damages and \$100,000 in compensatory damages. In court, we saw an officer questioned at the stand while Garcia's lawyer argued on his behalf. There was another court observation we had where our co-worker, Paul Senzer, was representing a client who had a tenant living in his home who had broken the terms of their agreement. Paul worked out a deal with the tenant before the court date and they agreed that the tenant would leave the premises by the end of September or face eviction, which the judge also agreed to when presented in court. The tenant had invaded the living space of the landlord, stolen his medicine, and refused to pay rent. The landlord was in a wheelchair and had mobility issues, and this whole situation was hard on him, so it was good that there is an end date in sight to the tenant being there.

Lastly, Erika and I worked on a small project towards the end of the program. We created a short letter describing types of financial fraud and scams and how to avoid them. The letter also touched on credit card debt and how to handle it. The goal of the letter was to be an informational paper to be handed to clients who are dealing with financial fraud or scams. AveMaria commissions her Summer Legal Fellows students to do similar projects that help clients and give them important information on legal matters.

My Summer Legal Fellows experience was my first exposure to the legal profession and introduced me to working in a law clinic. I interacted with clients who had requested legal help, helped clients to create wills, and sat in court a few times. This experience better prepared me for potential work in the future as a lawyer, whether or not I work in a senior citizens law clinic. I also made some good connections and have more familiarity with the process of going to court. Overall, this was a great experience and I would recommend it to anyone interested in going into the legal profession, whether you intend to work with clients or not.