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This summer, I had the privilege of serving as a judicial extern for the 17th Division of the First Circuit Court in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Honorable Ronald Johnson presides over this division as the criminal administrative judge. During my time at the 17th Division, I learned tremendously about the criminal justice system, particularly about the intersections between criminal law and mental health.

On my first day, I observed arraignment & plea (A&P) and bail hearings. At these hearings, it was interesting to observe what factors the judge considered in making certain decisions such as whether to grant or deny supervised release or whether to confirm, reduce, or raise bail. I also saw what factors or issues the State and defense addressed in requesting the Court to reach a particular decision. I was surprised to see how policy reasons could be made at these hearings, such as raising bail as a way for the Court to establish its position that certain behavior was intolerable.

This Court does not have trials however, one of the main issues it addresses is whether an individual is fit to proceed to trial, as well as to other court proceedings. For example, if in another division there are questions about a person's fitness to proceed, then an order to determine a person's fitness capacity may be made and the case is transferred to our division. If the person is found fit to proceed, then the case is returned to that division and the trial may resume. Otherwise, if they are found not fit to proceed yet restorable with treatment, then they may be ordered to undergo such treatment in order to restore them to an appropriate level of fitness.

One of my first and main assignments was to read and synthesize the examiners' evaluations on an individual's fitness to proceed, likelihood of regaining fitness if they were found unfit, dangerousness, and/or penal responsibility, as well as any recommendations or additional comments that they made in their reports. Through this process, I gained a lot of insight into the examiners' evaluation process, such as the factors they considered to reach a certain outcome. The examiners' reasoning reminded me of a totality of the circumstances test because in addition to using their interview with the individual, they also referred to any available mental health and/or criminal records, the current charge(s) and what had transpired for them to get charged, and the events or circumstances leading up to the person gaining the charge(s).

In addition to gaining an understanding about the process to determine fitness, I also learned about other areas that this Court presided over such as conditional release, supervised release, temporary hospitalizations, 72-hour holds, and the jail diversion program. In preparation for hearings on these events, I reviewed and summarized reports and recommendations from probation officers and treatment teams. A reoccurring theme I saw was how common it was for individuals to fall into a cycle of decompensating and improving. I saw a lot of cases where it was a cycle of someone gaining conditional release, become temporarily hospitalized, have their conditional release be reinstated, then be temporarily hospitalized again, and so forth.

From this externship, I gained a profound understanding of the influence and dominos effect a person's mental health has on themselves and those around them. I realize and do not take lightly the fact that I likely witnessed some of the most difficult and lowest points of these individuals' lives. Likewise, I also appreciate the happier moments, like when a person completed the terms and conditions of their conditional release and were released from the Court's jurisdiction over them. It was eye-opening to see how a person's life could be halted for months or years in the process of becoming fit or completing various programs. I hope to take the stories and experiences I gained from this externship with me as I delve deeper into the legal field.