

Andrew Kuna

During my 1L summer I got the opportunity to work for the Unemployment Law Project (ULP). The ULP is a non-profit law firm that provides free legal services to individuals who are appealing their denial of unemployment benefits. The ULP provides both free legal advice over the phone to clients and provides free legal representation in administrative hearings where administrative law judges make rulings on whether or not individuals are entitled to the benefits.

My work started off with client intake, I would receive the exhibit packet and information about the client's case. I would review all the materials in the exhibit packet before giving the client a call to ensure I had a solid background understanding and to bolster my credibility before jumping on the phone with the client. I would then give the clients a call explain who and what ULP does before walking them through our intake form. At the end of the call I open the floor up to the client so they can share their side of what happened and I interject with relevant questions when I need clarification.

After a couple of weeks into the internship and some observations of hearings I was given my own case. My first hearing revolved around whether my client had good reason to quit their job whereby they still qualified for unemployment benefits. My client stated they quit their job because the work had induced extreme mental pressures on them resulting in a first-time diagnosis of anxiety. The preparation for the hearing was predominantly researching the relevant laws, identifying the major issues that would be in contention, and conducting pre-hearing conferences with the client. During the pre-hearing conferences I would explain to the client the hearing procedure, impose on them our overall strategy, prep them with questions that I expected the judge to ask, and give feedback on how best to frame their answers.

In the hearing itself the role of the representative is pretty limited as I can make objections, ask direct and cross-examination questions, and give a closing argument. Unlike most trial proceedings, the administrative hearings are primarily the judge directly addressing the claimant. Despite my client having a mix-up and being ten minutes late to the hearing, everything went pretty smoothly and the judge was sympathetic to my client's story. It was a pretty surreal experience as this was my first time representing someone in a legal proceeding and to receive a judgment in our favor was highly rewarding.

The days leading up to the hearing I was extremely nervous and spent many hours just reflecting on whether I had covered all my bases in terms of potential questions and issues that could be brought up. I was also panicking that I would do something improperly that could harm the client in the hearing. All of these concerns were mitigated through the excellent supervision and help I received from the two lead attorneys at the ULP. Throughout my internship they have been excellent resources and were great people to bounce ideas off of and give me direction when I felt lost.

After the first hearing experience I was granted the opportunity to do two more hearings, the second one we were also able to win, and I have my third one upcoming in a week. It has been a tremendous experience to be able to represent people in actual legal proceedings after just one year of law school and I am really thankful for the guidance I have received from the ULP staff attorneys. My aim for my first summer internship was to get exposure to client interaction and representation to help prepare me for a career in criminal law and the internship has more than lived up to my expectations.