

Meg Rutherford

This summer, I've had the honor of working as a legal intern for Eastside Legal Assistance Program (ELAP) in Bellevue, WA. ELAP is a legal aid organization that primarily provides housing and domestic violence (DV) assistance to residents of King County. Though I worked primarily for a DV attorney, I was also lucky enough to collaborate on projects for several housing attorneys.

Over the course of the summer, I researched and wrote memos, observed DV and Family Law hearings, investigated policy changes, called clients, and drafted court documents. Together, these tasks taught me about the complexities of Washington state law with regards to family law, protection orders, and landlord-tenant law. With no background in any of these types of law, I was able to gain hands-on experience regarding which documents need to be filed for different motions and stages of the legal process. I was able to learn about court procedure with a level of depth that we did not have time for in Civil Procedure, as well as the ways state and different district courts operate.

Researching issues related to family law and housing took me in unexpected directions. For instance, I was tasked with looking into options for survivors of DV to purchase real property confidentially. This search led me to an initiative in its infancy, designed by a pro bono attorney at Davis Wright Tremaine (DWT) in conjunction with the Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) at the Secretary of State's Office. By creating a revocable living trust, survivors of DV who are already enrolled in ACP can purchase real property without ever signing their name on publicly recorded documents. Instead, they sign documents under the name of the trust as well as an appointed public trustee. This research, which started with a broad DV legal question, brought this program to the attention of ELAP and brought me into contact with changemakers at DWT and the ACP office. I was able to learn about DV legal issues as well as trusts and property. Similarly, housing research has allowed me to learn about reasonable accommodations case law, Section 8 program structure, and even federal laws such as the False Claims Act.

The most rewarding work I have been able to do is drafting motions and documents. Drafting is the best way to gain experiential knowledge of procedures, which facts are most important to the legal issue, and how to advocate for a client. My supervisor waited until I understood the basics of Washington DV and Family law before allowing me to draft DVPOs, Restraining Orders, and Motions for Temporary Family Law Orders, as well as editing client's declarations for clarity. Doing this work not only saves our staff attorneys valuable time that can go back toward the client, but it also allows us to build the skills that will be used in direct representation of clients.

I couldn't have asked for a better summer experience than I have had with ELAP. Experiencing the hard work, care, and brilliance that goes into legal aid work is inspiring and has motivated me to continue pursuing excellence in public interest law.