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LAW Advocates of Whatcom County Program Intern

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

MAKE WAVES.

Internship Title: Programs and Events Intern

Organization Worked For: LAW Advocates of Whatcom County

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Internship Dates: 1/10/24 6/7/24

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Department ENVS

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DATE: 6/10/24

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June 2024

Summary

I was a Program and Events Intern with LAW Advocates (LAWA) throughout winter and spring of 2024. LAWA is a non-profit organization providing free civil legal aid to low-income residents of Whatcom County. LAWA is centered on fostering community resilience through legal networks, “We strive for a compassionate and just society where legal and community volunteers work together, in equitable partnership with affected communities, to achieve access to justice for all marginalized people with dignity and racial equity” (LAWA, 2024).

LAWA has various legal programs to connect clients with volunteer attorneys to receive a legal consultation. Such as the Street Law (SL) clinics. At SL clinics, a client can meet with a volunteer attorney for a free 15-to-20-minute consultation. Throughout the consultation the client can ask any legal questions, go over court documents, and receive legal advice to navigate their issue. SL clinics are held at the Bellingham Library, Whatcom Community College (WCC), and Opportunity Council every month. SL at the Library can see clients who have general, family, and landlord/tenant legal questions. SL at WCC provides general and family law help. SL at Opportunity Council provides family and landlord/tenant assistance. The attorney at WCC is a professor within WCC. However, the other two SLs often rotate attorneys giving the opportunity for various attorneys within the county to volunteer.

Another program LAWA offers is the Debt Collection Clinic. At this clinic clients meet with an attorney to receive legal advice on medical debt, collections, bankruptcy, garnishments, and other debt related questions. LAWA also provides will and power of attorney assistance through the Wills Program. This program is unique in that clients are referred to a specific attorney after completing an in-depth screening packet. The Kinship Custody Clinic (KCC) is a specific program for those seeking guardianship of a minor. A rather new program LAWA has put together is an Immigration Clinic. This is a two-step program focused on assisting with various immigration related questions.

LAWA connects clients to services through phone call, email, and sometimes in-person. As the Programs and Events Intern, I am the first point of contact for most clients. When clients call LAWA general phone line, they are met with a voicemail. LAWA calls back clients in the order calls are received. The same goes for emails – clients are replied to in the order emails are received. Other times, clients will show up to the office in-person. LAWA is unable to accommodate in-person consultations at the office for a few reasons. Such reasons are limited staff availability, limited physical space, and there is not a volunteer attorney in office to provide legal advice.

Sometimes LAWA does not have the capability or resources to assist a client because of their legal issue or they are financially overqualified. Common resources clients are referred to are the Northwest Justice Project (NWJP), Moderate Means Program, Washington State Bar Association (WSBA), WashingtonLawHelp, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services (DVSAS), Opportunity Council, or the prosecutor’s office.

Throughout my time at LAWA, I came across a plethora of legal issues. Such as domestic violence incidents, divorces, social security issues, eviction notices, landlord negligence, medical malpractice, hate crimes, estate planning, and child support/custody cases. Civil legal aid covers various practices of laws, but I saw the most legal questions relating to family law and landlord/tenant.

Introduction

It was a dry and cold day in January. You know the days when the air hurts your face the second you walk out the door. I wait in the middle school parking lot for my sister to pick me up, peering out every few seconds for her red truck. On the drive home, my sister, Marci, did not say a word. Distraughtly keeping her eyes on the road, as if that was the only thing keeping her focus to drive. Odd. It took three steps into the kitchen for my mother to break the news. My oldest sister was taken off life support earlier that day. Marcelina was flown to a Seattle hospital three days prior when her ex-boyfriend attempted to kill her with a metal baseball bat. Lena, the nickname I like to call my sister, was extremely close to exiting the abusive relationship. I remember babysitting her two kids a few months beforehand. Lena was in front of me, explaining something, but all I could focus on was the blue and back skin framing her right eye. I could trace every vein in her bloodshot eye. The months following her death included the funeral, the hearing to sentence the ex-boyfriend, and the kid's guardianship hearing. As a 12-year-old, I could only fathom the surface of the situation. I was angry at the world and confused how something like this could happen to my family. At university, I was entirely unsure of what I wanted to study. I was relatively interested in ecology and the natural environment. As my schooling continued, I only became more unsure of my choice to study environmental policy. I knew I wanted a career in the legal field but had serious doubts that environmental law will be the right decision. In winter of 2023 I decided to apply for an internship at LAW Advocates hoping to explore the combination of the legal world and social work. With this internship I hoped to gain a better sense if law is the right career path for me. This internship has solidified my unsureness and doubts of attending law school into aspirations of becoming an attorney.

Going into the internship I had intentions to learn how laws and policies can directly aid residents who are the most underserved and underrepresented. From this, I would learn and take part in the process that provides legal assistance. I would be able to observe the function of laws and the ways in which laws can help those most in need. I wanted to learn how to navigate delicate situations that require specific skills to advance the situation to come to a resolution. Such as redirecting the client if they go off topic, asking specific questions based on the client's situation, and remain emotionally sensitive to the client. I also had intentions to improve my oral communication skills so I can adequately aid the client and gather all necessary information for the attorney. This includes accurately describing what the legal clinics are and what LAWA can provide. Another aspect I would learn are specific laws, policies, and precedents that are applicable to individuals and their situations. Such as legal processes concerning landlord/tenant or family law. I did not have any expectations on the nature of situations I would interact with.

Another reason why I applied to this internship is because I wanted to explore my interest in the legal field. I previously considered attending law school after undergrad but was still unsure if law is a career I genuinely want to pursue. This internship allows for me to explore my interest while laying down the basis for a general understanding of legal processes. I also had thoughts about focusing on environmental law in the future but am having doubts if this is the correct practice area. Since LAWA assists with civil legal issues, this allows me to explore other areas of law and take a step outside of the environmentalism realm.

Internship Activities

The internship can be split into two parts: office work and clinic work. At the office, I primarily focus on logging calls, calling clients, and emailing clients. When clients call LAWA, they will automatically be met with a voicemail. We log the client's voicemail and all relevant information (phone number, name, date, time, if voicemail is ok) into a call log on excel. Voicemails are logged in the order we receive and called back in the same order. Sometimes I listen to the voicemails and log them into the call log. Most of the time I work on calling clients back. Unless specified, I leave clients a general voicemail when they do not answer following this script: "Hi this is Zyanya with Law Advocates. Please give us a call back at 360-671-6079. You may also email us at info@lawadvocates.org or check out our website, lawadvocates.org to see upcoming legal clinics in Whatcom County. Thank you. Bye, bye". When clients do answer I generally say something along the lines of, "Hello, this is Zyanya with Law Advocates. Is this so and so? Awesome, did you have a moment to chat about the voicemail you left a few days ago? What is your legal issue? What is your desired goal?". Based on the legal question, I often ask investigative questions to better understand the situation. For example, if a client is needing help with a divorce, I would ask these sets of questions: Have you filed for divorce? Do you have children together, if so how many and what are their ages? Based on the information the client provides concerning their legal issue, I make a recommendation for one of our services or refer the client elsewhere. Usually, clients are open to providing extensive information

I often have to clarify to clients that LAWA cannot provide legal representation but rather legal consultation. I think many individuals have expectations of legal services that do not align with the actual functions. I have spoken to many clients who are needing representation in court but cannot afford an attorney. I explain that a consultation is a good starting point and the attorney can point the client in the right direction. I think people become discouraged when they learn LAWA does not provide representation. If a client is needing representation and has the means to obtain such a resource, I point them to the WSBA. WSBA is an online legal directory that contains lists of practicing attorneys that can be sorted by county and expertise. If the client is facing an emergency or a deadline within seven days, I refer them to the NWJP through a CLEAR Call Back Request (CCBR). The NWJP is a similar organization to LAWA because NWJP also assists clients with civil legal issues through consultations. I fill out the CCBR with the client's general information, a quick description of their legal issue, and explain if the client is in an emergency or facing a deadline. Once the CCBR is submitted, the NWJP will call the client in 2-3 business days and go from there. Sometimes, LAWA clinics can be towards the end of the month. If a client calls at the beginning of the month after the date of clinics, they often have to wait a few weeks to receive a consultation at the next clinic. Some clients cannot afford to wait a few weeks for a consultation. When this happens, I often complete a CCBR and encourage the client to still attend our clinic if they have yet to hear from NWJP. Such legal issues where I have submitted a CCBR are eviction notices, domestic violence incidents, unsafe housing conditions, or if the client is currently facing the risk of homelessness because of a landlord/tenant issue. The only thing about submitting a CCBR is I do not know if the client ever received legal assistance. Sure, I can assume if the client does not attend LAWA clinics, but I never know if the client was truly advocated for.

While in the office I also enter completed intake forms into Legal Server (LS). LS is a data entry program that tracks all relative information on a client who receives services from LAWA. Relative information is all the information on the intakes, what services the client received, time spent with the attorney, and the attorney(s) the client consults with. Once a client is established in LS, the client has a profile that can be updated with any new information. LS is a great program for filing and keeping track of client information. The intakes I enter into LS are often from Street Law or Debt Clinic. I transfer all information from the intake into the program then scan the paper intake, Limited Service Agreement, and any other relevant documents into the client's profile. The next thing to do is to assign the case to the volunteer attorney. After the clinic ends, I add how much time the attorney spent with clients. I do this by calculating how many clients were seen during the duration of clinic. Once I find how much time was spent, I add the time to each client's profile and the assigned attorney. Depending on the client's outcome of the consultation, I either "close", "reject", or leave the case "open" once all information is entered into LS. For example, if a client received a consultation and is not needing further consultation, I close the case in LS. The case still exists in LS but tells others the case has been resolved. I often reject cases if a client is a no show to an appointment, financially over-qualified, or canceled the appointment. If a client is needing further consultation, I leave the case open.

Other office work I completed is making signage in Canva. Such as a doorbell protocol flyer. This flyer explains the process for staff to follow when a client rings the office doorbell. I also created the invitations, name tags, food tags, and bingo cards for the volunteer appreciation party. I love to make design projects for myself as a hobby. I found it amazing LAWA allowed me to create designs for office use while interning. Creating designs are a nice breather from speaking to clients after an emotionally taxing day.

Attending the legal clinics completes the other half of the internship. The clinics I staff are all the SL clinics and the Debt Collection Clinic. The time I spend at the clinics are all very similar to each other. At SL at the Library, I often stay put at the general law check in table. This check in table is for clients who have general legal questions. Such questions relating to real estate, homeownership, public benefits, contracts, deceptive sales, and various other legal issues. The process for a client to check in is to provide their name and sign a Limited Service Agreement (LSA). A LSA explains that the attorney the client is seeing is only for the duration of the consultation and the attorney is not offering representation after the fact. Once the client signs the LSA I either walk them back to the volunteer attorney or ask them to wait until the attorney is ready. Other than staffing the check in table I also help set up the tables with all necessary supplies and clean up once the clinic is over. Sometimes I print documents or make copies for attorneys when needed. At the other SL's and Debt Clinic I still staff the check in table as well as conducting intakes with walk-in clients. Conducting intakes is a very simple process. I sit down with the client, ask them the questions on the intake, and write down their responses. The information on the intakes are: name, date of birth, language preference, county of residence, zip-code, phone number, if it's ok to leave a voicemail, email, gender, pronouns, race/ethnicity, if client is a tribal member, if a client is Hispanic or Latino, housing status, veteran status, if client is female head of household, if client is disabled, how many adults/children in household, income source, monthly income amount, if the client has an active case open related to their legal issue, and lastly room to write down the details of the clients legal issue. Completing intakes helps LAWA determine eligibility status of clients. Most of the time spent at clinics is staffing the check in table and conducting intakes when needed.

Internship Achievements

After six months of interning, I will have talked to a few hundred clients. Some of these conversations have stuck with me.

One of the calls I experienced was very emotionally taxing. This client needs help filing for divorce. Throughout their marriage the client experienced various domestic violence incidents but the most recent one was their breaking point. The client is clearly in emotional distress and is traumatized from the events. I signed the client up for Street Law at the Library as well as referring them to DVSAS. I reiterated that the client calling us is a huge step in the right direction. It's amazing that the client was able to take this first step. I also let the client know that the consultation is a great starting point, and the attorney will be able to point the client in the right direction. I also explained to the client that DVSAS is a great resource if they are needing to talk to someone about their experiences. I remember the client being extremely grateful for the consultation and for the information about DVSAS. More I think the client was appreciative someone was there to listen and offer assistance to leave their situation.

Another client I called is facing hostile racial discrimination in their apartment complex. The police and apartment complex are not addressing this issue. I registered the client for Street Law with the hopes that the client can learn what legal precautions to take as well as what legal options are available for racial discrimination. The client was completely distraught. The client broke down on the call and explained that they could not believe this was their life. The client immigrated early in life to America with hopes of fulfilling the American Dream. I tried my best to reassure the client. I told the client that receiving a consultation is a huge first step in the right direction. It takes a lot of courage to stand up against racial hostility especially within one's housing situation. I ended up setting the client up with two consultations at SL at the Library. One with a general law attorney to explore what legal precautions are available. The other consultation with the landlord/tenant attorney to discuss if legally breaking the lease is viable, if the property management can be held responsible, and other questions relating to the clients housing.

There was another elderly client who fled their abusive relationship. This client was not currently living in state but is a Whatcom County resident. Due to the location barrier, I set the client up with a remote consultation. I often think about this conversation with this client for many reasons. Mostly because this client is elderly and the length of the marriage. I cannot imagine the amount of strength and courage to take the step to leave such a complex relationship. I let the client know how strong they must be to leave the marriage and no longer put up with abusive behavior. The client was extremely grateful for accommodating the location barrier.

Often times clients provide vivid descriptions of their situation. I have listened to clients describe the physical and mental abuse they have endured by their partner. I have been informed of the unsafe and inhumane living conditions clients are exposed to. I listen to clients explain some of the worst situations they have faced in their life. I will always listen to a client and offer them empathy. For the sake of my mental health, I try to gently redirect the conversation. For example, when the client takes a pause in their storytelling and I know they qualify for our services, I tell them what the services are. Such as the date, location, time, and structure of the applicable program. If the client continues to get off track, I remind them of the recommended program and that it is a great place to start. I will almost always tell clients that its huge step for them to call us or that they are doing a great job for reaching out for help. To wrap up the conversation, I always ask the client if they have any questions. Most of the time they do not or ask me to repeat any times and dates I mentioned. I notice many clients will thank me for giving them a call back. That appreciation will always go such a long way for me. So many clients I interact with are lost, distraught, and stressed from their situation. Clients are grateful to just receive a call back and to be pointed in a general direction.

When I first started making calls, I found it difficult to interject when a client was talking. Sometimes I would be on the phone for upwards of 25 minutes because I would allow the client to chat about excess information that was not vital for my ability to make a recommendation. For reference, I found I can gather all necessary information and make a recommendation in about 10 minutes or so. I realized after the first few calls I had where clients would chat; I just have to interject. Some of my go to phrases are: "Hey so and so, I am not an attorney so I cannot give you legal advice. However, the clinic I mentioned earlier will be a great starting point", "Hey so and so, I have to give a call to other clients, so I am going to let you go. If you have any questions in the meantime, please don't hesitate to give us a call back" or my personal favorite, "I am realizing I need more information and need to touch base with my manager. We'll give you a call back in a short while". Almost all of the time these phrases work and I am off the phone in just a few minutes. The few times the above phrases did not work I will flat out say, "I do have to let you go now. I took notes of our time and I will pass them along to someone else who may be able to better assist you".

I would like to acknowledge that listening to the client and understanding the clients legal situation is important. However, my time is also valuable. It is not always viable for me to listen to a client vent when I have already made a recommendation. In that time, I could have referred another client to a resource. My main goal is to always refer as many clients as possible to legal services to the best of my ability. I cannot do so if I am constantly getting stuck on the phone. Sometimes inserting myself mid-sentence pulls at my morals. I grew up learning to speak when it is my time, including never purposefully start talking when someone else is. I do have to fight this habit and keep it in the back of my mind that cutting the client off is necessary in certain situations. Other times I found it difficult because I can tell the client has not had other opportunities to speak about their issue. Talking to me may be the first time they have felt listened to. Especially in cases where the client is enduring domestic violence.

Discussion and Evaluation

When I started the internship, I did not have many expectations. I figured I would learn about legal processes, general laws, and what legal services are available for those most in need. By the end of the six month period, I feel confident in obtaining all necessary information from the client and connecting the client to the appropriate resource. I feel that I am leaving with a better understanding of how legal processes aids those most at risk.

There are three different SL clinics LAWA offers: SL at the Library, SL at Opportunity Council, and SL at Whatcom Community College. Although clients can receive a 15-to-20-minute consultation with a volunteer attorney at all SL clinics, the type of legal issue that can be seen differs from each clinic. SL at the Library can see general, family, and landlord/tenant law. SL at Opportunity Council offers family and landlord/tenant law help. SL at Whatcom Community College helps with general and family legal questions. Based on the client's legal issue, I can determine which clinic is going to be a better fit for the client. To better prepare for the consultations, I try to gather as much relative information as I can from the clients. Such questions I ask are dates, times, names, previous action taken, previous incidents, and what specific questions the client has for the attorney. This information helps the attorney before the consultation as well as my understanding of the legal situation.

The other clinics LAWA provides are KCC, Debt Collection Clinic, and the Wills Program. These clinics focus on more specific legal questions. For example, KCC only provides legal assistance to those needing guardianship of a minor. There are also many requirements for the program that client must suffice. The Wills Program is only able to provide assistance with simple wills and power of attorneys. Just as KCC, the Wills Program has specific requirements the client must meet to be eligible. It is my responsibility to conduct the screening process for these programs when I come across the client needing the services. I also must explain to the client why they do not qualify if that so happens. The Debt Collection Clinic can only see clients who are the debtor – not the collector. I feel confident in that I know the ins-and-outs of each program, how to register a client for a program, and I can effectively articulate the different programs to clients.

LAWA has financially eligibility requirements that prioritizes low-income residents of Whatcom County. LAWA bases the financially eligibility requirements on the 2024 Federal Poverty Guidelines with a cap at 200%. I just need to know how many adults/children are in household, their income source, and their monthly income amount. Often, I can get a feel for if a client will be financially eligible through context clues. For example, if a client mentions they are on a fixed income or receive public benefits, they most likely will qualify. Other times I can quickly get the sense that a client will not financially qualify. For example, a client was explaining to me they had to spend $6000 fixing up their multiple properties. This $6000 ended up being the amount of their two income checks. What I hear is one check is $3000. Despite if this is a monthly or a bi-weekly income check, this automatically over-qualifies the client. I also hear the client owning, or at least maintaining, multiple properties. Most low-income folks do not own multiple properties, so I start to think this client is not financially eligible. As it turns out, the client was financially over-qualified for our services.

When I first started calling back clients, I felt very awkward to ask for their financial information. However, the more I did it the more it became natural. To check the clients financial status. I often saying something along the lines of, "LAWA has financial eligibility requirements. We often prioritize low-income residents of Whatcom County. Do you consider yourself low-income?". Clients will either say yes or no and explain why. I also found it uncomfortable to tell a client they are not financially eligible. When I do tell a client they are over-qualified, I also follow up with available resources. Such resources include Moderate Means Program, WSBA Legal Directory, and WashingtonLawHelp.

I mentioned earlier that I applied to this internship because I wanted to explore my interest in law. After these past six months, I am confident in my future plans to attend law school and pursue a career in the legal field. I absolutely enjoy speaking to clients and offering them the bits of reassurance when I can. I also enjoy learning about the different types of legal issues and possible remedies. To my surprise, I find family law the most interesting. Family law can be many different legal issues such as divorce, custody, guardianship, or incidents of domestic violence. I naturally felt drawn to family law. As I reflect on my work completed at LAWA, I am more than fulfilled and satisfied to be part of a program focused on upholding systems of equitable access to justice for all.

Acknowledgements

To everyone in the office for welcoming into a world I did not know I would fit in to. A special thanks to the other interns who made me feel not so alone in navigating the impacts of social work as a young adult.

Appendices

Below are designs I created in Canva for LAWA use.

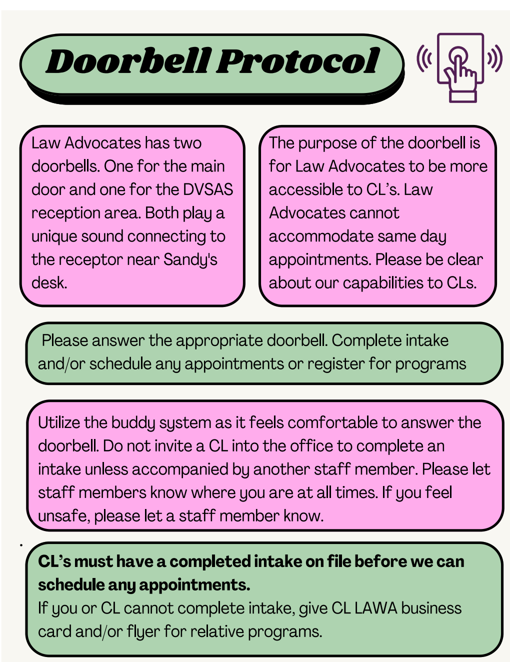

Figure 1. Doorbell Protocol - What steps staff should follow when a client rings the office doorbell.

Figure 2. Invitations to the volunteer appreciation party.

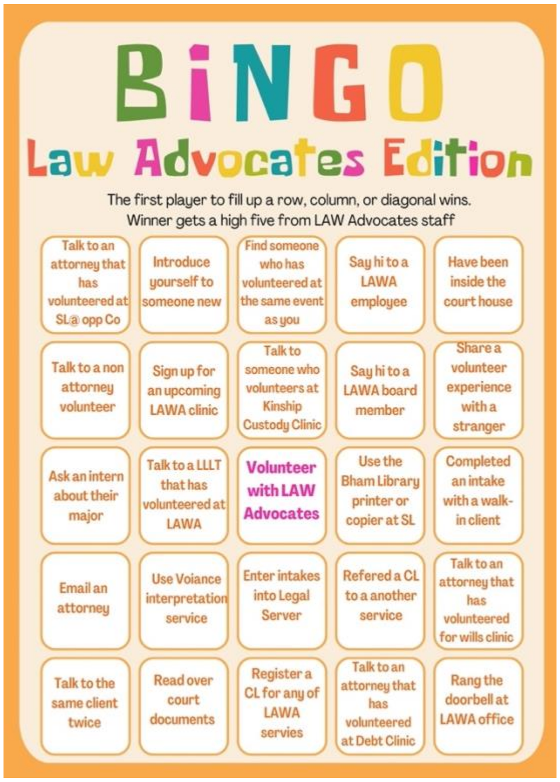

Figure 3. Bingo for the volunteer appreciation party.

Works Cited

Our Mission, Vision, and Values. (2024). LAW Advocates. https://lawadvocates.org/our-purpose/