

Liman Summer Fellows: Final Report

I appreciate the opportunity provided by the Liman Fellowship in facilitating my participation in an unpaid internship this summer. My placement was in the offices of my home state Senator, John Cornyn of Texas, in Washington, D.C. As an intern, I was able to experience the inner workings of a congressional office—from basic constituent services to policy refinement. However, most importantly, the internship provided me an opportunity to learn about the problems facing constituents in Texas—and understand the process of assisting individuals in their interactions with the federal government.

Indeed, by its nature, the office fielded and answered questions in every category. On any given day, the office could be simultaneously working on an inquiry on judicial vacancies to questions about the Senator's policy positions to assisting constituents in their disputes with the IRS or claims with welfare agencies. As someone unfamiliar with these issues, having the opportunity to experience first-hand some of the benefits and programs available at the federal level was eye opening. In fact, access to the inflow of constituent concerns was like a barometer of what was happening at any period of time. For instance, I was in the office during the aftermath of the Affordable Care Act ruling, and it was fascinating to watch how constituent concerns changed relatively quickly in response to the Supreme Court decision. In fact, a development in the financial markets or international affairs could change the landscape of constituent concerns and create a new issue to which the office had to respond.

On the other hand, the opportunity to attend and take notes at committee hearings, markups, and briefings provided a contrast to looking at issues and problems at an individual level. Indeed, watching the policy process unfold—and the political maneuvering involved—was

highly informative and could not be experienced outside of Washington. For instance, one common constituent letter would describe a dispute with the IRS regarding deductions, penalties, or interest. But, the chance to look at the reasoning (or lack thereof) of complex provisions within the tax code helped provide a context for the dispute—and view the evolution of a policy from inception to application.

One particular experience was especially enriching and memorable to me. An emerging cause for concern among veterans in this country has been the rapidly increasing backlog of Veterans Administration disability and medical claims in the last several years. While the problem affects claimants nationwide, Texas has been particularly affected by the backlog. The causes of this delay are multifaceted: new ailments (sometimes from as far back as the Vietnam War) have been declared eligible for claims, digitization efforts have been slow etc.... Thus, the chance to view the problem from several angles—from a constituent complaint about the slowness of processing to hearing what the VA Secretary intends to do to solve the issue—was highly informative. Indeed, it was highly fulfilling to be part of an organization (the Senator's office) committed to solving the backlog and ensuring that our veterans receive the benefits to which they were entitled.

Moreover, this experience in particular and the internship in general confirmed my aspiration to study law and medicine. While my undergraduate background is in the sciences, I have a continued interest in how law interacts with science and healthcare. As government continues to become more involved in healthcare, the field will demand a great deal of emphasis to ensure that the quality of care continues to improve while access expands and costs remain manageable. The coming years promise great changes in healthcare, and that will require input at

all levels—from elected officials to physicians and other healthcare practitioners—in order to ensure that patients remain well served by the system.

Without the Liman Fellowship, I would not have been able to work in Washington this summer, and I am grateful for the opportunity to venture away from my comfort zone of the natural sciences and explore a different field. As such, I think that this program facilitates this type of experience, and I commend the organizers on their great work. I hope that others have the chance to have as fulfilling an experience as I did.