

Abigail Gellman
Princeton University
Brooklyn Defender Services, Summer 2016

Liman Fellowship Report

Last summer from mid-June to August, I interned at Brooklyn Defender Services (BDS), a public defense organization in Brooklyn that provides legal assistance to the indigent. I worked as an investigative assistant, both assisting in the office and mainly going out on cases all over Brooklyn to find information that attorneys needed to support their clients. In the office, I learned how to log cases, run searches in legal databases, write subpoena requests, and helped organize and file cases and more. After two weeks of shadowing full time investigators, I went out on cases myself and with another summer intern, I spoke to clients, canvassed for and extracted video surveillance from banks to corner-stores, served subpoenas, took photographs and drew out diagrams of relevant locations, identified eye witnesses, and interviewed complaining witnesses in misdemeanor cases. Back at the office, we did subsequent research and made follow up calls as necessary and emailed or spoke directly with attorneys about what we found.

I learned so much from my nine weeks at BDS. The internship provided me valuable on the ground experience getting a sense of the people, crimes, and communities that are policed, and I spent time in Brooklyn neighborhoods and meeting people that I would not have otherwise. I learned about best practices and strategies from note taking methods to handling sensitive phone calls and interviews that enable the best possible investigative assistance in criminal defense cases. All the interns did mock interviews with our supervisor and the full time investigators twice throughout the summer to help us prepare to do them on our own and give us feedback. In addition to all we learned from the daily cases we went out on and the office work we helped with, the full time investigators and our boss enriched our internship experiences by having us shadow attorneys for a day during arraignments in downtown criminal court and also visit a community courthouse in Red Hook. A Jail Services Coordinator at BDS that I chatted with also invited me to go to a July Board of Corrections Meeting where the agenda was a discussion of the delayed end of the use of solitary confinement for young people on Riker's Island, which was fascinating to attend. Sometimes interns were also asked to help attorneys in other ways on an as-needed basis, and I got to accompany a BDS attorney to be a witness to a lineup at a precinct; observing the lineup and attempting to ensure it was conducted fairly was really interesting and revealing of how a process used to potentially incriminate someone is run.

Working at BDS reinforced my belief that everyone deserves proper legal representation and bolstered my interest in pursuing criminal justice reform and social justice work after graduation, as well as potentially going to law school to work in public interest law and criminal defense. I am grateful to the Liman Fellowship for providing me the funding to intern at Brooklyn Defender Services and for the colloquium last March, full of inspiring speakers and organizations, that reinvigorated and excited me about going into the field of advocating for a humane justice system in my future.