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Liman Summer Fellowship

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: Midwestern Regional Office

My Liman Fellowship enabled me to intern at the Midwestern Regional Office of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in Chicago. The Commission is an independent federal agency which examines civil rights in the nation by appointing State Advisory Committees (SACs) and creating reports with federal law and policy recommendations. The Commission's projects focus on issues of voting rights and alleged discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, or national origin, or in the administration of justice. All minutes from SAC meetings, transcripts from public meetings, and finalized reports are available to the public on the Commission's website.

The Midwestern Office, which has absorbed much of the Central Office's states due to staffing limitations, handles the projects of several SACs at various stages, from proposal gathering, to putting together panels of experts for the public meetings, and finally the report drafting. I worked on projects for Mississippi and Missouri.

Mississippi's child care subsidies project was concerned with investigating alleged discrimination toward African American recipients of federal low-income child care subsidies as well as the disparate impact on African American care providers. I drafted a preliminary memo report from the transcripts of two teleconference meetings held earlier in the year, with findings and recommendations. I presented this to the Mississippi SAC during a teleconference meeting. Based on the testimony of the panelists, it appeared that the state's administration of Child Care and Development Funds (CCDF) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

benefits, as well as the implementation of a biometric finger scanning program which was made mandatory for parents and guardians receiving such subsidies, were the main culprits of the disparate impact on the African American community. Preliminary findings suggest that while racial biases historically exist in the state, the economic decisions by the state's Department of Health were poorly planned and may have unintentionally created a disparate impact on the basis of race. The greatest challenge for me was to maintain unbiased language in the report, though it was evident to me personally that the testimony of both community members and official showed a lack of regard for African Americans in the system.

My second major ongoing assignment was preparing for a public meeting in Kansas City, Missouri on the topic of police and community interactions in the state. This Missouri project began in late 2014, after the death of Michael Brown. This meeting at the end of August was the second of two, the first having been held in St. Louis in the winter. SAC meetings are composed of a number of different panels with people who are able to share their testimony to the Committee members and represent as many opinions as possible in order to obtain a holistic, unbiased view on the topic. I researched potential panelists in the areas of academia, government, and law enforcement, as well as community leaders and members would be able to share their personal experiences. I included outreach and communications skills in my goals for improvement at the start of my internship, and I am pleased to report that I feel measurably more confident and effective when reaching out to others. There was a balance when communicating with potential panelists, since we had to gather more than there were spots on the agenda in case of late scheduling and last minute cancellations which, according to my supervisors, happened frequently with government officials. It was disappointing when other civil servants at both the local and occasionally federal level could not commit to their availability at the meeting, but it

became clearer to me in the days immediately before the Kansas City meeting why this could have been happening.

My immediate supervisor, Ms. Melissa Wojnaroski, had recently heard that the representative from the city's police department would no longer be coming, and that the department had no plans to send a replacement. Fortunately we were able to meet with an officer on the day before the meeting, who shared with us some of the concerns of other officers. The mayor of Kansas City also informed us that he would not be able to attend as a panelist or audience member, and it was disheartening that they could not directly address the issue of law enforcement interactions with the community at our meeting.

On the day of the meeting, there was a turnout of around 70 people, and the most enthusiastic participants were the leaders of relatively small organizations. I was grateful that I was able to use my Liman Fellowship funding to travel to Missouri and spend a day in preparation for the meeting, which was the culmination of my internship. As the office was only able to pay for their permanent staff, I would have missed seeing the results of my work without the help of external funding. It was rewarding to see how much most of the attendees appreciated the meeting. In particular, I remember finding the social media accounts of some panelists' organizations while I was at the check-in desk and seeing how they actively promoted our event on their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The officer we had met with from the Kansas City Police Department was able to provide public comment during an open forum, and the atmosphere between the law enforcement representatives and the general public was better than the St. Louis meeting, according to Melissa. In the February meeting, most of the officers arrived together, in uniform and with their guns, which not only added to the preexisting tension, but also indicated the apprehensiveness of

the law enforcement officers which I had not anticipated. Before becoming involved in this project, it seemed clear to me that there was an imbalance of justice which favored the police officers, who therefore would have less reason to feel unease. Additionally, during our research our office found that the Kansas City Police Department appeared to be doing things a lot of things right, in comparison with other major cities and especially smaller departments just outside of the metropolitan area. The KCPD is under the direction of a board of commissioners, with the board's president being a highly respected person especially in communities of color for his prior role as a founder and president of an anti-violence nonprofit. I would like to note that he presented on panel as a representative of the board of police commissioners. In my opinion, however, there was a missed opportunity for dialogue as there was no formal presentation from an officer from the city's police department on the agenda. Still, the second Missouri meeting was important and developed a better picture of the issue. I was proud to see people from organizations that I had personally communicated with, finally in person. I invited representatives from the Kansas City Anti-Violence Project, who are LGBTQ advocates and spoke during an open forum session. They were hesitant to invite members of their community who may have had traumatic experiences with the police, but I was glad that they were able to share their voice with the Committee.

As I reflect on my internship, I remember meeting an attorney at the Kansas City meeting who currently represents a mother whose son was wrongfully killed by the police. Her passion was one part of many during my internship that inspired me for my future. After the meeting ended, I asked my other supervisor Dr. David Mussatt, the Chief of the Regional Programs Unit for the Commission, about his experiences in the office. He related to me the slew of hate crime-related projects which sprung up in nearly all 51 SACs after 9/11. I have

personally witnessed and experienced Islamophobic and anti-Arab sentiments, so learning about how this topic was decided by the SACs to be the foremost civil rights issue, over the other proposed topics, was moving. As a result of this internship, my plans to go to law school was affirmed, and more importantly, I have seen the importance of being an advocate for others.