

This summer I worked at Rhode Island Legal Services (RILS) in Providence, Rhode Island. I worked part of the time for the Family Advocacy Program, an innovative medical-legal collaborative and partnership between RILS, several hospitals and community medical centers, Brown Medical School and Roger Williams Law School. The other part of my time was spent at the RILS offices helping my supervisor with various aspects of her cases in the Family Law Unit and with other attorneys in the Domestic Violence Unit.

Three afternoons a week I worked at a “Family Help Desk” at Hasbro Children’s Hospital. Families referred to us by doctors or who had seen our posters and flyers would stop by to get help on legal and other issues. The amount of interaction time with real people was extremely rewarding. I performed the initial intake interview, created a file, researched the person’s problem and provided information that hopefully helped them solve it. If the question was one RILS could handle, I referred that person to the appropriate attorney. The times I was actually able to help, particularly with domestic violence issues and families who had legal issues like getting their SSI benefits cut, made me think how the lawyers can really make a positive difference in people’s lives. However, the vast majority of families that came to the desk were simply looking for housing and basic financial assistance—they were homeless, living with friends, were on every Section 8 waiting list in the state but were looking at a five-to-ten year wait. These people had applied for government benefits but didn’t qualify for various reasons; they had participated in job training and gotten their GEDs and were actively looking for jobs but simply couldn’t find them. For these people, I was only able to give them more phone numbers of agencies to call. This summer made me realize the acute shortage of resources for people without jobs or a lot of money, even if they are doing everything they are supposed to and are playing by the rules.

In the Family Law and Domestic Violence Units, I interviewed clients and did intake, made follow-up calls, helped clients prepare divorce papers, and wrote up divorce complaints and various court orders, motions, and judgments. I was also assigned various research projects by RILS attorneys throughout the summer, covering topics ranging from restraining orders to court interpreters. Rhode Island Family Court is very informal, and I was able to go to court at least every week and sit up in front with all the lawyers. My supervisor brought me around to meet all the judges and clerks, and I talked to Domestic Violence advocates in Providence and Warwick and observed them in action.

I learned a tremendous amount this summer, specifically about family law and domestic violence law, and generally about how the court system works. I could witness rules of civil procedure in action, and I learned enough about the substantive law that I could answer clients’ questions in a confident manner (after warning them, of course, that I could not give legal advice!). It was amazing to sit down with someone you had just met and have them pour out this incredible story of their lives, completely trusting in your ability to help them. The best part, of course, was when I actually could.