

This summer I interned at the Claremont office of New Hampshire Legal Assistance (NHLA). There are four offices around the state and this one branch covers much of western New Hampshire. NHLA gives legal assistance to those who cannot afford representation in civil cases that include evictions, disability insurance, and unemployment benefits. I had the opportunity to work on these types of cases and see the importance of NHLA to many people and communities in New Hampshire.

The majority of cases I worked on were disability cases. NHLA represents disadvantaged people who are physically, mentally, and/or emotionally disabled and are unable to work or hold down a job because of their disabilities. The State of New Hampshire tends to reject most applicants when they file for disability insurance right off the bat. These people then have the right to have a hearing to state why they think they are unable to work.

I found these cases most saddening because the clients essentially have no income and have had no income for many months. All too often, the clients' housing and salvation come down to one hearing. It's scary to think that many people who are legitimately disabled and unable to work are still denied insurance by the government.

Work is vital to survival and once that ability is taken away it is extremely difficult to survive. Going into my internship I believed that education could help decrease poverty levels in this country. However, since working on disability cases, I realized that disability also keeps many people impoverished. Education is obviously very important, but, just like a lack of education, physical, emotional, and mental disabilities often keep people impoverished. Helping those who are disabled is a commitment of NHLA and should be for all of society.

I was also able to brief and read many unemployment insurance cases. These cases are probably the most interesting because the employer always has a different story than the employee. Like much of the country, unemployment was very high this summer in New Hampshire. I worked on cases where employers illegitimately fired employees and it was very difficult for the clients to find jobs because there were very little jobs available.

One of the high points of the summer was going to a hearing that involved Wal-Mart, New Hampshire's biggest employer. One of the local stores fired a young man unfairly. Wal-Mart lost the case, which isn't a big deal to a massive corporation like that.

However, it was very pleasing to see someone who was unjustly fired by such a big employer win the case. It made it very apparent how important NHLA is to many people in the state who can be fired unfairly. Like disability cases, the livelihood of people filing for unemployment benefits rides heavily on receiving those benefits. It was disturbing to see Wal-Mart unfairly fire someone and then contest his claim for benefits, which brought the case to a hearing. However, in the end, they didn't get away with it.

Out of all of the hearings I went to and all the cases I read, it became obvious how vital NHLA is to many New Hampshire communities. The disadvantaged in New Hampshire are all too often left out and forgotten, but it's nice to know they have NHLA to help them when they need help the most. Something is wrong with the system if there is a seemingly nonstop flow of impoverished people who are disabled or filing for unemployment. It sometimes seems more important to try to change the system from its

roots, but that isn't always realistic. It is also important to play within the rules of the system and help as many people as possible. That is exactly what New Hampshire Legal Assistance does and I'm glad I had the opportunity to experience that.