

Elizabeth Taylor

My summer experience was more than worthwhile. I gained so much by working with the Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy. The organization serves to provide each client with high quality services through an effective delivery system, which ensures a defender staff dedicated to the interests of their clients and the improvement of the criminal justice system. The attorneys are defenders who take on only criminal cases for those who cannot afford it. They are individuals who use their passion to serve others. As an intern, I worked daily with attorneys to conduct jury research, interview clients and witnesses, and use my critical thinking skills to assist in preparing for upcoming cases.

As advocates, attorneys have to present their clients' cases like a story. Their job is to persuade the jury that the story they have shared is true and that their client is innocent. An attorney has to exude self-assurance and not be timid because this can be seen as a sign of weakness to the jury, and the jury could also interpret the attorney as lying. While in court, many people do not deem this stage as important, but opening statements weigh heavily on jurors' decision-making. First impressions set the tone on both sides for the entire case. For example, cases that involve sexual acts with a minor are particularly difficult in persuading a jury. Although not proven guilty, some jurors go into this type of case with preconceived notions that the accused is guilty. This was one of the many lessons I learned during my internship.

Furthermore, although the criminal system is supposed to be just and fair to all individuals, this is not always the case. Many people of color receive harsher punishment for equal or lesser crimes than do whites. Over the summer, it was eye opening to know that people of color automatically come into the process with a disadvantage and the public defenders have to work twice as hard just to serve and protect their clients. In June, I attended an annual Public

Defender Education conference that expanded on the racial disparities that exist in the criminal justice system. More blacks and people of color are incarcerated than any other race. These individuals also tend to be in the lower social classes. It was wonderful to learn that the public defenders I worked with did a great job of serving those who are marginalized. They dedicate their lives to the public good and betterment of others, regardless of race.

Towards the end of the internship, I attended a prison tour and was able to view a local prison. While not explicitly mentioned on the tour, prisons are basically run as a business. As sad as it is, the prison system profits from the amount of inmates it has. For instance, an inmate requested to be moved to another jail, yet when the attorney called on his behalf, the prison said they could only accommodate him if they also received another inmate in exchange. They specifically mentioned that they would be losing money if they let an inmate go. It is essential for us as a society to work to improve our criminal justice system to better our society as a whole. Instead of working to help inmates function properly in a society, prisons want to keep them there because of monetary gains.

Overall, I had a wonderful experience this summer as a recipient of a Wellman Hill grant. I want to thank the Wellman Hill program for this opportunity. Seeing how public defendants serve their community through the law was powerful and made me more committed to public service. There are many individuals who need help, and it's refreshing to know that there are individuals who have dedicated their lives to their community. As I continue to grow personally and professionally, I will devote my life to public service.