Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) is a non-profit organization that provides high-quality legal representation to low-income communities across the state of New Jersey.

I spent most of my time working with the LAMP program, a healthcare-based initiative centered on bridging the gap between the medical and legal world. Through medical-legal partnerships with 4 local hospitals in NJ, LAMP can legally address the socio-economic problems that lead many low-income community members to the emergency room.
MY WORK
WORKING WITH CLIENTS THROUGH LAMP

- My work with LAMP consisted primarily of working with clients (over 25 cases) through various applications and issues related:
  - Unemployment
  - Guardianship
  - Child Custody
  - Child Support
  - Divorce
  - Food Stamps (SNAP)
  - CVERAP
  - Medicaid
  - Social Security
In addition to LAMP, I also did miscellaneous tasks/research assignments for other projects under LSNJ. Some assignments included…

- an analysis of NJ hospital funding through the CARES Act
- tracking PPP loans to NJ law firms across the state
- entering recent eviction filings into a database
- writing case summaries for recent decisions for other LSNJ attorneys
- I also wrote two articles about Hidden Foster Care for attorneys and community members
In disability court, the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) goal is to prove that a job exists in the economy that accommodates a given plaintiff’s disability (i.e., allows them to work). If SSA can prove that such a job exists, the plaintiff is denied disability payments. Often, the court relies on a “vocational expert” to provide information about jobs in the economy.

However, the vocational expert often uses outdated information from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT). Because the DOT hasn’t been updated since the early 90s (some jobs last updated in the 70s), the vocational expert misrepresents the state of the labor market. It is not uncommon for the court to deny a plaintiff disability payments under the justification that the plaintiff should work in a job that hasn’t existed in over 40 years.

This outdated information often goes unchecked due to advocates’ lack of knowledge and experience with dealing with labor market data. I worked on creating a guide for navigating through labor market data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics so that attorneys can better represent low-income clients attempting to secure disability payments from the Social Security Administration (SSA).

- ONET
- Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)
- Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS)
- Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT)
LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS
The casework I did with LAMP allowed me to constantly communicate with clients, offering me the opportunity to see the human side of public policy. This intersection of theory and practice allowed me to enhance my perspective on the harsh realities faced by poor communities all over the country, something that can easily be forgotten within the walls of our ivy-covered dorm halls.

A notable case I dealt with was the handling of a client’s Medicare for his family. The client was unable to secure Medicaid for his children because COVID prevented him from securing SSNs for his newly-arrived children. As he dealt with this issue, his wife was diagnosed with stage IV brain cancer, resulting in hundreds of dollars in medical debt. To think that there are thousands in his situation made me quite reflective of the state of our medical system in the US.

This is merely one example of some of the issues Americans across the country face daily, many of which are not visible to those of us with the privilege to study in ivy-league institutions.
One of my main responsibilities was interacting with the bureaucratic world in order to gather necessary documents for legal proceedings. I contacted doctor’s offices for medical certifications, called police departments to gain access to police reports, argued with NJ FamilyCare to explain to me why a client was denied coverage, and I grew frustrated with the bureaucratic walls I slammed into with SSA.

When I was tasked with these missions, they seemed quite simple to me. After numerous hours on the phone with recalcitrant phone operators, I quickly understood that I could not equivocate simplicity with difficulty. Though I struggled to be patient with agents at times, I learned that getting frustrated over the phone did nothing but worsen the situation. On the bright side, after hours of calling numerous offices, setting up a doctor’s appointment for myself is no longer a fear for me, ha!
The most important lesson I learned this summer is that there’s always more work to be done. Every time I would finish a case, I would receive two equally heartbreaking cases immediately afterward.

However, I do not say this with pessimism. For me, this is an invitation to work even harder. Based on what I’ve seen this summer, if I don’t help these low-income community members, the odds of them receiving help from someone at all goes down exponentially. It is the realization of this fact that motivates me to look towards Public Interest Law for my future.

I thank everyone at LSNJ for giving me the opportunity to learn all these valuable lessons this summer. I am forever grateful.