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Summer Legal Fellows

Albany Law School

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This summer, I had the privilege of working with Marissa Hochberg, Michael Potter and Austin Winter at Albany Law School's Government Law Center (GLC). We spent the summer working for the Rural Law Initiative, a GLC program, under the supervision of Taier Perlman, the staff attorney for the Rural Law Initiative and Andy Ayers, the director of the GLC. The focus of the Rural Law Initiative is to address the lawyer shortages that face rural communities in New York State. In addition to running the Rural Law Initiative, Taier is also the co-chair of the New York State Bar Association (NYSBA) Task Force on Rural Justice. The bulk of our work this summer was to provide the NYSBA Task Force with additional information on the rural legal shortage.

Our first task of the summer was to familiarize ourselves with the current crisis by reading law review articles and past GLC reports on the issue. I learned that rural towns do not have enough attorneys to keep up with the demand for legal services. Communities with a pronounced lack of legal services have been termed "legal deserts" and are a major problem in rural New York. Lawyers in these rural towns frequently don't have the experience to help in more specialized areas of law. Because rural communities are often poor, many clients are not be able to afford to pay the full cost of legal services. This makes it harder for these areas to attract attorneys who can make more money working in cities. Even when lawyers want to work in rural communities, law school debts can make rural legal practice an impossibility.

After we gained a clear understanding of the problem, we turned to the issue of data collection. Specifically, we wanted to know what areas in New York are in the worst shape. We utilized records from the Office of Court Administration to identify the number of attorneys in each county and compare that to census data. From there we were able to calculate the ratio of residents per attorney to identify counties that have the most need. We made a table to display our findings and included median household income to examine the ability of residents in each county to afford legal services.

Our next task was looking at programs in other states that aimed to address the legal shortage problem. We divided the fifty states between the four of us and worked to compile a survey of state bar and law school initiatives that had been implemented to address the legal desert problem. Through a combination of internet research, emails and phone calls, we reached out to each state bar associations and law schools for information. While some never got back to us, the majority of them were able to offer us valuable feedback. Several states have taken steps to address rural legal shortages and we were able to compile all of those approaches in a single document. Unfortunately, in most states, the programs were quite new, so data on the success of each program is limited.

After compiling the state bar information, we were broken up into teams of two to write policy memos outlining how individual programs function in greater depth. These memos will be given to the members of the NYSBA Task Force to help them quickly digest the scope of policy options. Austin and I were tasked with explaining the state bar initiatives. Because brevity was important in these memos, we selected a few plans that were either unique to that state or representative of a type of plan that had been implemented elsewhere. In this memo, we went

deeper into the details of the programs than we had in our initial survey. We learned about the funding sources of programs, gathered information about stakeholders, and learned what internal diagnostics had been used by the respective organizations to measure success. While we did hit some dead ends in our search for information, we were able to find the requisite data on most of the projects we were investigating.

Once the memos were completed, the other fellows and I were asked to each research a related topic of our choice and write a policy brief detailing our findings. I decided to research federal programs addressing shortages of medical personnel. I was able to compare the efforts that have been made to increase the number of doctors, nurses and other medical professionals in rural communities to similar efforts made to attract lawyers. What I found was that there has been a much larger effort made in the medical field than in the legal. In particular, I compared the now-defunct Reginald Heber Smith Community Lawyer Fellowship Program (RHS) to three medical programs, Area Health Education Centers (AHECs), the Rural Health Clinic (RHC) program, and the National Health Service Corps (NHSC). Because the RHS fellowship was discontinued, we have not seen the same gains be made to address the legal shortages in rural areas as we have for medical shortages. While the existing medical programs may offer some tactical insights into how a federal program could address the legal deserts issue, the primary problem right now is a lack of political will to put funds towards this problem. The ultimate conclusion of my issue brief was that the real problem was of a political and not policy nature.

This summer gave me a number of fantastic personal and professional experiences. In addition to the projects I worked on, my time at Albany Law also gave me several opportunities to learn about law school, state government, and the legal profession. We went on several trips

including to the state capital, the New York High Court of Appeals, and the NYSBA headquarters. We visited the capital twice, once for an extensive tour and lesson on capital history, and once to witness debate in both chambers. I had never seen the inside of the capital before, and I found both trips to be exhilarating. At the High Court of Appeals, we received a tour and had the privilege of a private Q&A session with the Honorable Leslie E. Stein, an Associate Judge of the court. Judge Stein was extremely informative and was happy to answer every question that I could think of. We attended two Task Force meetings at the NYSBA Headquarters where the other fellows and I were able to sit in.

The opportunities that I had this summer at Albany Law have only strengthened my passion for the law and my desire to attend law school. Conversations that I had with GLC staff members helped me to gain a better understanding of what law school is like and what it takes to be a lawyer. We had a sit down meeting with Dean Ouellette who was able to answer our questions about Albany Law. We also met with Pershia Wilkins, Assistant Director of Admissions, who walked us through the law school application process. Additionally, we received training in *West Law* and *Lexus Nexus* that will give us a head start when it comes to legal research. My experience with the Summer Legal Fellows program has been incredibly positive. I am confident that what I have learned this summer will assist me in law school and my future legal career.