

## **Interim Report July 2019**

**Jenny Jiao**

**Office of the Attorney General, New York**

For the past 5 weeks, I have been interning at the New York Attorney General's office in the Civil Rights Bureau. I am incredibly grateful for the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation in their support of my work this summer. In the past few weeks, I have had the unique opportunity of working on a wide range of civil rights cases and seeing up close the incredible impact that this office has on the progress of civil rights in this state and the country.

From the very beginning, the attorneys in my Bureau have entrusted me with high levels of responsibility. I have been able to work on a series of cases, ranging from voting rights to sexual harassment in the workplace to criminal justice to housing discrimination. In each case, I have been able to work closely with the attorneys by writing research memos, summarizing evidence and interviews and participating in internal strategy meetings.

As the only undergraduate intern, I have been given unique opportunities to write legal memos for attorneys, diving into the case law around both federal and New York state civil rights laws and procedures. Most recently, I have been drafting a legal memo alongside a law student intern; it is learning experiences like this that have not only greatly deepened my understanding of both the procedural and substantive aspects of filing civil rights complaints, but also reinforced my passion and desire to continue this work as I map out my career.

While learning the technical aspects of civil rights law has been rewarding, one of the most insightful aspects of my work is being able to participate and contribute to outreach meetings that our attorneys do with community members who are affected by discriminatory practices. The Office of the Attorney General routinely connects with advocacy groups, affected community members, and local organizations in order to get a fuller understanding of what the community needs most and how best our office can support those goals. It is in these moments that I am continually reminded that the minute elements of a legal brief have real, substantive impact on individuals' lives—this is the reason why I do this work.

My deeper understanding of civil rights law has not only impacted my assignments at work but has also helped inform my research outside of my internship. Aside from working, I am also working on econometric research on the impact of algorithms, such as predictive policing and risk assessments, on criminal justice outcomes. The Attorney General's Office has given me the legal perspective I previously lacked, and further helped hone my research focus to discern the discriminatory impact, or disparate impact, of such algorithms, in the hopes that my research can have both policy and legal implications. I have come to realize that social science research, policymaking, and litigation all have distinct and sometimes siloed actors, but are all working toward the same goal of a more fair justice system. I am hoping to continue to translate what I learn at work to my research, and vice versa.

Furthermore, I chose this internship particularly because I wanted to be able to impact discrimination at the systemic level. In my volunteer position as a guardian ad litem in North Carolina, I try my best to advocate on behalf of children who are in the

foster care system. One of the most frustrating feelings I have routinely faced though, is feeling as though the actions I take as an individual do not change the laws or the systems that people of color face. In this internship, I have been able to see firsthand how discriminatory policies can be forced to change, and how a government agency that is progressively minded can enforce civil rights laws for huge corporations and entire local governments.

In addition to the pending cases I am working on, I have also had the unique opportunity to go to court hearings for a number of federal cases that our office has against the federal government. For example, I was able to attend a court hearing on the Census case (Department of Commerce v. New York), and will continue to as the case develops at the Southern District of New York. Being able to speak with the attorneys that have worked so hard on this case has been incredibly instructive, and being able to watch as Attorney General James proclaimed to the nation that every person, immigrant or not, would be counted, was not only important to me as an advocate for civil rights, but as an immigrant myself.

Finally, in addition to the work I have done and have been able to witness, the Attorney General's office has a series of brown bag lunch presentations for all of the interns in the office to hear from leaders across the legal field and further understand how to develop a legal career. While all of these lunches have been extremely helpful in allowing me to imagine different career paths, one made a lasting impact on me. During June, Judge Alison Nathan of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, came to one of our brown bag presentation lunches. Judge Nathan was one of the first LGBTQ+ federal judges appointed to the bench and is an incredibly powerful legal

mind. In her speech, she spoke about the importance of having diversity on the bench and in policy spaces and reminded us of both the immense progress our country and our case law has made in the past few decades, and also of the need for dedicated lawyers to continue the fight for civil rights for all people in this country. She has inspired me to continue striving for a more just world, and to continue believing that litigation is the path toward that change.

Overall, I could not be more grateful to the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for allowing me to pursue such a unique summer experience. It is a special time to be working at the New York Attorney General's office and I feel immensely grateful that I am able to contribute toward making New York State a more just and less discriminatory place to work and live.



*Attorney General Letitia James being introduced at a press conference just after the Supreme Court released its decision in Department of Commerce v. New York, a case that the attorneys at my office worked on. All of the interns in our Bureau were able to attend the press conference and cheer her on as she announced that the citizenship question would not be added to the 2020 census.*