

I had the opportunity to spend my summer working for James Stephens, an attorney for the Department of Children's Services (otherwise known as DCS). The DCS office is in a town called Tullahoma, which comprises the South Central region of Tennessee and covers Coffee County and Marshall County. Working for Mr. Stephens was an amazing, rewarding experience that I wish I could continue throughout the school year. While I was interning for an attorney, the DCS office is not set up at all like your typical law office. There are no mahogany bookshelves, "Lady Justice" scales, or fancy cars in the parking lot. The DCS building is nestled in a lower-income neighborhood area of Tullahoma, Tennessee. When you work here, your workspace will not be "glamorous." It will most likely be at a cubicle, in a fairly large building with fluorescent lighting and a possibility of whiffs of leftovers that someone just heated up for lunch. However, despite all of these petty details, the main thing you will realize on your first day is that you are surrounded by amazing, hard-working, and uplifting people. You may be in a cubicle, but right across from you is one of the sassiest, funniest secretaries you will ever come across in your working career. DCS case workers will often stop by to have a conversation with you (or just because they want to crack some stereotypical "intern" jokes). When preparing for court, you will become best friends (not kidding) with the Coffee County clerks, who are pretty much the most amazing group of people in the state of Tennessee. You will get to know many of the local judges, lawyers, and law enforcement, and will work alongside another intern who is just as confused as you are in figuring out the inner-workings of the job of a juvenile lawyer.

The office is split up into several different departments: Legal (that's us), Child Protective Services, Juvenile Justice, and Family Social Services. While each

department has very different job titles, everyone has the same core goal- to assist the children and the families involved to establish a sense of safety and well-being by offering all resources available to keep the family together. It is difficult, if not completely impossible, to describe a "typical day" at the office, as we were usually guided by the events presented to us each morning--whether those events be a child being taken into custody or a parent not complying with a permanency plan. While much time is spent at the office preparing for court, two or three days of the week are spent in the courtroom.

The process by which a report of abuse turns into a legal custody battle generally starts out the same way each time, then develops depending on the severity of the situation. The legal department first receives a "legal referral" from the Child Protective Services workers (CPS). This typically happens when a report is made concerning an alleged situation in which a child is being abused or neglected by his or her parents. Most of the cases the Department of Children's Services handles are called dependent and neglect cases, where the children become subject to the tort system because of actions of their parents (usually physical or sexual abuse) or the inactions (neglect) on the parents' part. When a report is made, a CPS worker will go into the home and determine whether the children need to be taken into temporary custody. If they are taken into custody, Tennessee law requires that we file a petition in the Juvenile Court within 48 hours, and that there must be a court hearing within 72 hours following the children being taken into custody. One of the things I was responsible for was drafting these petitions to be filed in court. Writing petitions was a learning process--at the beginning of the summer, I did not understand how to use the correct form of writing to save my life. Fortunately, towards the middle-end of the summer, I started to get

comfortable with this style of analyzing the referral and writing the correct type of petition. After the petition is filed, there is a preliminary hearing, where the probable cause of a dependent and neglected case is presented to the court. Following this is usually an adjudicatory hearing, which is the main trial where “clear and convincing evidence” is presented to determine whether the children are dependent and neglected. There are usually many other hearings, but these usually depend on whether the parents are following their permanency plans and getting the assistance they need. Aside from drafting petitions, the other intern and I were responsible for drafting court orders and motions, recording forensic interviews from the Child Advocacy Center, hiring process servers, analyzing depositions, and contacting the guardian *ad litem* and opposing counsel to set court dates. We also got the chance to sit in on a medical deposition with a doctor at Vanderbilt University Hospital regarding a severe abuse case. Every task we were given was almost always a step towards preparing for court.

If you decide to pursue this internship, be prepared for a wonderful experience. You should also be prepared to experience emotional challenges throughout your time working here. The subject material can be appalling--you will have to write petitions involving severe physical sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, environmental neglect, and everything in between. It is easy to feel anger towards the alleged perpetrators, especially when you have to sit across from them at permanency plan meetings or listen to their testimonies at court hearings. It is a lot of hard work, and you will be at the office from 8 a.m. until 5 or 6 p.m. However, the rewarding experience you receive after working here will be unforgettable. I am so humbled to have worked with such diligent, good people who sacrifice their time towards achieving a greater good. I learned that I

truly enjoy this line of work, and pursuing law is something I could see myself doing, especially if I focus on a specific type of law that interests me. I have learned that I need to pursue a career that involves helping and communicating with other people. I also learned that I enjoy researching things that help prepare for court, such as digging up historical cases and looking up information on defense expert witnesses. Whether or not I decide to go to law school, I know that I made the right decision in working for the Department of Children's Services. I know that this internship will make a lasting impact on what I will choose to do with my career, as well as practical life decision-making. I honestly loved every minute of working at DCS, and have gained the type of experience that will prepare me for the rest of my life, no matter what I end up doing.