

Executive Summary

This summer I worked as a legal intern for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services ("DCS") in Tullahoma, basically job shadowing my boss, attorney James Stephens. Juvenile court met three mornings a week, with two days reserved for dependent and neglected children and one for juvenile delinquents, and I sat in the courtroom observing the proceedings and taking notes for the court orders that I would draft later. I also had permission to witness the meetings held in the judge's chambers, where cases could be discussed in private since juvenile court in Coffee County is open to the public. DCS handled on average about ten cases a day, which resulted in a tremendous amount of preparation and paperwork. After court was dismissed – generally around noon – I would head back to the office where I would attempt to make a dent in the incredibly overdue paperwork and carry out various small jobs.

Although DCS has the unique power to remove a child on the spot at any time, they must appear in court within three days with a removal petition. Since time is of the essence in these matters, I drafted one of these petitions almost every morning. An attorney or case manager would send me a referral, which includes all basic information such as names, birthdates, brief history of the family, the reason for removal, and requests for court-ordered services, and I would put the information into an official court petition. Because DCS files so many of the same types of orders and petitions, there are blank generic Word documents that provide a good start and save much time. Besides removal petitions, I drafted a large number of court orders; although the order would vary depending on the type of hearing, all of them included basic party information, who was present at the hearing, the court's findings, and finally the rulings. I drafted these orders based on the notes that my boss took in court and my own notes, and sometimes my boss would helpfully provide some dictation that he had recorded while in the car. Once I finished an order, it would have to be signed by my boss and sent to the court for the judge's signature and filing. Occasionally I would be assigned the task of drafting a long and tedious petition to terminate parental rights, but since this has drastic consequences and involves a vast amount of work, these cases were rare.

Besides the seemingly endless amounts of legal paperwork with which I dealt, I was given various assignments as needed. I spent a lot of time on the phone with the court clerk, either scheduling hearings or requesting information from court files and sometimes requesting subpoenas. Occasionally I would need to schedule a deposition, an odious assignment that involved the impossible task of finding – usually within two weeks – a time and location at which four lawyers and a doctor could meet. Sometimes I would need to call witnesses to discuss their testimonies and remind them of the court date, and sometimes I would need to hire process servers to serve people out-of-state. I learned how to do basic research on LexisNexis, reading through previous cases to assist DCS attorneys, and I would often need to read through case files to find discrepancies, provide an outline or timelines, and draft petitions. Very rarely I would need to perform mundane tasks such as photocopying or delivering documents to the courthouse, but for the most part my internship was intellectually stimulating and at times very stressful because I knew that the Department was genuinely counting on me to finish an important assignment.

My internship at DCS was rewarding in many senses – I had the incredible opportunity to handle confidential cases and witness court proceedings, meet attorneys, learn basic juvenile law, and enhance basic life skills – but what I appreciate the most was the perspective it gave me on this particular branch of law. I started this internship with a tentative interest in pursuing juvenile law as a career, wanting desperately to help children in a legal profession, but I have learned now that my view was optimistic and very much naïve. I do not begrudge DCS for disenchanting my opinion of law, and I believe that I will still pursue a legal career of some sort, but I did not realize exactly how many despicable, offensive, and depressing things I would be forced to deal with in juvenile law. Therefore, I am thankful that DCS gave me the opportunity to explore this area closely, and this internship will certainly be a key factor in choosing a career.