

Joel Langham / U.S. Attorney's Office, Chattanooga, TN

Interning at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Chattanooga, Tennessee, provided a unique opportunity to observe the practice of law as it pertains to promoting the interests and fulfilling the obligations of the federal government. U.S. Attorney's Offices are placed strategically in larger cities or metropolitan areas and are responsible for prosecuting federal crimes within a given district division. The U.S. Attorney's Office in Chattanooga is directly responsible for its district division, the "Southern" division which encompasses nine counties, but it also coordinates with the offices of other district divisions within the broader Eastern District of Tennessee. All U.S. Attorney's Offices derive their authority from the Department of Justice and ultimately answer to the United States Attorney General (currently, Eric Holder) appointed by the President of the United States. The often ignored constitutional role of the president is that of chief executor, or enforcer, of the supreme laws of the land—federal laws which hold ultimate authority in each of the states—and U.S. Attorney's Offices are tasked with ensuring that this executive role of the federal government is fulfilled throughout the United States. During my internship, the U.S. Attorney of the Chattanooga Office, William McKillian, met briefly with President Obama during his tour of a Chattanooga packaging plant as part of his promotion of a number of new economic initiatives.

U.S. Attorneys prosecute felonies according to the Federal Code as it has been defined and amended by Congress. The diverse bodies of law which constitute the Federal Code require a large support team of Assistant U.S. Attorneys who focus on particular legal areas. Although the vast majority of legal cases reviewed and prosecuted are criminal in nature, civil cases involving bankruptcy or other financial regulations are handled occasionally. During my internship, I was able to observe legal proceedings or trial preparations for a wide variety of crimes, including armed robbery, child sexual abuse, narcotics and marijuana trafficking, money

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laundering, and bank account structuring. Assistant U.S. Attorneys work closely with the FBI, the TBI (Tennessee Bureau of Investigation), United States Secret Service, drug task forces, and local law enforcement officials and have a great degree of freedom to select which cases are most worth pursuing. Cases that are prosecuted generally demonstrate a severe or particularly vehement contempt for federal law, a broad scope of violations (multiple alleged felony accounts), and an unusual degree of criminal exploitation or profit by the party or parties involved. In short, cases are in part selected in the hope that they will provide a high-profile, thorough deterrent for would-be felony committers.

The primary duties of my internship included attending hearings and trials at the federal court in Chattanooga, transcribing undercover video and audio recordings by TBI agents, and acting as a receptionist at the front desk of the office. All three duties exposed me to crucial aspects of the work done by the attorneys in the office. While I attended a variety of different court proceedings, I was able to observe a drug conspiracy trial from jury selection through the forfeiture determinations following the jury verdict, an experience which left me far better informed about the legal process and the role lawyers have in it. I was asked to transcribe conversations recorded by an undercover TBI agent investigating an illegal narcotics distribution ring (a "pill-mill") operating under the pretenses of a legitimate, privately-owned medical clinic. Painstaking care had to be taken to ensure that fidelity to the audio recording was achieved, as these transcriptions would be provided as an aid to jurors listening to the recordings when they were presented as part of the government's prosecuting evidence at trial. These transcriptions would also allow the legal team working on the case to review and select the most pertinent and indicting recordings during the process of evidence assembly. Finally, I was asked to operate the front desk at the office, which including screening and transferring incoming calls to attorneys

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and legal assistants in the office, interacting with visitors to the office, operating the manual security locks for doors, and miscellaneous office paperwork. The U.S. Attorney's Office has to take a number of security precautions for obvious reasons, but calls to the office must be screened to ensure that defendants or others involved in cases do not interact with the attorneys or legal assistants assigned to the prosecution.

Observing the proceedings of one particular trial over the course of a month allowed me to provide valuable feedback and impartial insight into the strength of the prosecution team's arguments and overall strategy. I was asked to meet with the prosecution and discuss strong and weak tactics as well as comment on my perceptions of the jurors and their responses to the prosecution's evidence. In a sense, I was able to offer feedback as an "honorary juror" who observed the proceedings at face value and who would assess the case based on the merits, both argumentative and rhetorical, of the prosecution and defense teams. This meeting, in addition to other meetings and discussions over the course of the internship, emphasized collaboration and strengthened my communication skills, giving me greater confidence in my capacity to be a valuable, creative, and productive member of a group effort. My work as a receptionist further enhanced my communication skills and required me to maintain a professional demeanor under pressure, especially in circumstances when multitasking was required. While I did not find that I was intrigued by the legal proceedings and I do not now have any intentions to become a lawyer, the general expectations of the office environment provided much-needed further experience in professionalism and the relevant skills of collaboration and communication, both of which are invaluable for any career.