



Jesse Larsen

Stipend Takes Summer Interns on Road, Offers Real World Experience with a View

BY THOMAS QUALLS, ESQ.

Unique summer internships created in partnership between the Department of Indigent Defense Services (DIDS) and the William S. Boyd School of Law at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas offer law students the ability to be student practitioners in rural Nevada courtrooms. DIDS was created by the Nevada Legislature in 2019 to assist counties in creating more effective and sustainable indigent defense systems. As part of its mission, DIDS has been working with Boyd to create pipeline programs that introduce law students to the judicial systems in rural Nevada counties, where access was previously limited.

The first program to launch features a choice of externships (in which students earn academic credits) or internships (in which students do not earn credits) that are designed to engage law students in the practice of indigent defense, including the opportunity for some rare hands-on courtroom experience that will serve them for years to come. The students also reap the benefits of working in the beautiful rural areas of the state. The program officially began in summer 2022 and will continue in summer 2023. Students who are chosen will receive a stipend to help cover living expenses.

Money for Food and Lodging

A generous grant from the State Bar of Nevada has allowed DIDS to offer these opportunities for law students. The program currently selects two Boyd law students per summer to receive a stipend of \$6,500 to work in an organized public defender’s office in one of Nevada’s rural communities.

The Travelers

The inaugural interns for summer 2022 were Mia Perez and Jesse Larsen, both third-year law students at Boyd. We caught up with them recently and had the chance to ask a few questions about their experiences.

The Destinations

The program gives big-city law students a taste of life in a different environment. Perez and Larsen both loved getting out of the Las Vegas heat and spending time in nature in Northern Nevada.

Perez: “I grew up in extremely large urban areas. I am originally from Central New Jersey, about 30 minutes away from New York City. My internship in Elko was the first time in my life that I lived in a rural area. I admit there was some culture shock at first (Elko does not have a Chick-fil-A, for instance), but I was surprised how quickly I began to enjoy the environment, including the beautiful mountain ranges surrounding the city. I started going hiking for the first time in my life and discovered I love being out in nature.”

Larsen: “I grew up in a somewhat mixed urban/rural environment nestled in the



Mia Perez

Virginia Foothills between Reno and Carson City. My small neighborhood was close to Reno, but far enough away that we still had wild horses and deer in our front yard. I also spent a lot of my childhood camping in Nevada's backcountry. In this way, working with the State Public Defender's Office in Carson City and Storey County during this internship was somewhat nostalgic for me."

Reasons to Embark

Larsen: "I chose this internship because it offered an opportunity to work with experienced criminal defense attorneys and represent clients who are in genuine need. I plan on working in public defense after I graduate, so this internship was a great opportunity to network and gain experience that I will use to jump-start my career. As an added benefit, this internship gave me the chance to escape the summer heat of Las Vegas for the comparatively cool climate of Northern Nevada."

Perez: "I chose this internship because it allowed me to obtain Student Practitioner status, which gives me the ability to try cases under a supervised attorney, and it provided many opportunities that no other internship would. Very few law students can say they tried an actual bench or jury trial, or negotiated with prosecutors, and zealously advocated for clients. Larger cities like Las Vegas could not have provided me with this level of hands-on attention and autonomy that I received while in Elko."

Highlights of the Journey

Perez: "One of the highlights of my experience as an intern was the guidance I received in how to handle bench and jury trials, and also the autonomy I was given. Even though the bench trials I prepped eventually pled out, the experience of formulating a trial plan was challenging and exciting. Appearing in front of a judge, in an actual case, as the defense counsel for indigent clients was extremely rewarding. After one hearing, a client asked if she could hug me. It made me feel really good that I had the ability to positively impact her life."

Larsen: "One of the most interesting experiences I had over the summer was working with child defendants. In the ivory tower of law school, it is often easy to overlook the realities of our legal system, especially as it concerns children in the criminal justice system. It was interesting and exciting to see how professional attorneys and judges interacted with children in juvenile court, and how they created as non-threatening an environment as possible. I was also able to see first-hand how different it is to represent a child compared to an adult."

Mapping the Future

One of DIDS' goals is to bring new and energetic practitioners into Nevada's rural communities. We hope that the experience, and the communities in which the students live and work, will sell themselves.

Larsen: "I do want to work in indigent defense."

Perez: "I plan on working with indigent litigants, but on the civil side. My post-graduation plans are to pursue a career in civil rights and impact litigation for marginalized communities."

Travel Reviews

DIDS intends to continue the rural pipeline program. It was important for us, then, to get feedback from our first round of students on what they thought of their experiences.

"This internship was a great opportunity to network and gain experience that I will use to jump-start my career."

Perez: "I enjoyed working in the Elko Public Defender's Office. I would definitely recommend this program to other law students! My internship was in Elko, which is a lot cooler in temperature than Las Vegas, plus it has amazing views. All of the experienced attorneys were incredibly

kind, and they provided mentorship and lifelong professional connections. My supervising attorney was a rockstar and was really hands-on when it came to teaching me about criminal defense work, including how to complete client intakes, prepare trial plans, formulate concise arguments, negotiate with the prosecution, draft motions, and more. All of these experiences will translate well into any legal position, whether students are considering criminal defense work or not."

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Larsen: “I would absolutely recommend the program to another law student! Especially if they even had a vague idea of working in public defense. I really enjoyed my time with the State Public Defender’s office. All the attorneys and office staff are super nice and helpful. Carson City is a beautiful place, and it is *very* close to Lake Tahoe (not to mention much cooler than Las Vegas in the summer). This internship offered me invaluable experience in not just criminal defense, but also general legal skills, from client counseling and negotiations to jury venire and trial prep. All of these skills and experiences would be useful to any law student, regardless of what career path they intend to take.”

“After one hearing, a client asked if she could hug me.”

Elko County Courthouse in Elko



Carson City Courthouse in Carson City



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The Return

DIDS wishes to thank the State Bar for its generous contribution that makes this externship/internship program possible, and also Dawn Nielsen and the Boyd School of Law for their continued collaboration in this effort. DIDS is excited for next year’s program. For more information on DIDS, please visit the website at dids.nv.gov. If you or someone you know would be interested in participating in this program in the future, please contact Dawn Nielsen, Esq., director of the law school’s externship program, at dawn.nielsen@unlv.edu or 702-895-2403.



THOMAS L. QUALLS serves as a deputy director for the Department of Indigent Defense Services. He was in private practice from 2003 until he joined DIDS in April 2021. Qualls previously served on the Washoe County Indigent Defense Conflict Panel, as well as the federal Criminal Justice Act panel, and he is SCR 250 qualified for capital appellate cases. He is also an award-winning author of three books.