

Orleans Public Defenders Scholar Reviews

(available on Robertson Connect)

Sam Zahn (UNC '22)

I worked at OPD for 10 weeks this summer. I did various tasks, really anything, anyone in the office needed. Mostly, I worked for MK Sullivan, a social worker operating under the GOFAR Project. GOFAR (Gaining Opportunity From Arrest to Reentry) is a program that provides alternatives to incarceration. I spent most days making jail visits and submitting record requests.

Carry yourself like an employee and OPD will be sure to treat you as one. To do this you have to shed the stigma that comes with being an intern. Don't expect to come into the office with grandiose visions of tearing down the criminal justice system. It's fine to think that but OPD doesn't need that. They need you to make bond calls, transport visits, medical records requests, and at times, shred paper. You are there to help these people, and to do so you should constantly be asking what you can do for OPD. Do not worry about what OPD can do for you. The men and women who work there are angels. They will be sure to return the favor.

A.G. Chancellor (Duke '21)

The Orleans Public Defenders office occupies 2 floors in an office building in downtown New Orleans, Louisiana . OPD represents indigent defendants, people who do not have money to higher a private attorney on their behalf. My work this summer was as an advocate in the Client Services division. In this capacity I worked with attorneys to gather documents (medical records, school records, employment history, etc.) to present in court on behalf of clients. Additionally it was my responsibility to assist clients with extrajudicial matters such as housing, rehabilitation, childcare, education, employment, etc.

I would advise reading about the history of criminal justice in the United States at large as well as specifically about New Orleans. (Recommendations: Chasing Gideon by Karen Houppert, Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson. Additionally there are many great studies and other resources online). The work is emotionally taxing, but some of the sting can be taken out of your initial encounters by being prepared for what you are going to see. This work will provide you with rewarding moments, such as gathering records that play a key role in the judge ruling to release your client. However, more often than not you are going to be faced with failures. Judges will make illogical and sometimes cruel rulings, prosecutors will make decisions that seem aimed at deliberately harming the most vulnerable citizens, resources to aid clients will be scarce, if they exist at all. Working at the office will be a humbling experience that showcases a side of life probably not common to most scholars, as well providing a firsthand view of the flaws in our justice system.

On a more logistical note, I recommend bringing a car. It not only makes your life easier but it makes you a more valuable asset to the office.

Gramal Ralph (Duke '21)

I did a 10-week internship at the Orleans Public Defenders Office. There, I worked with multiple clients who were currently incarcerated or were incarcerated and some point and assisted them with all non-legal issues such as: housing, drug treatment, unemployment etc.

This job does take a heavy emotional toll as the problems you deal with are highly sensitive. Take advantage of the down time you get to recharge and practice self-care while also doing your fair share of sightseeing and exploration.

Evan Rodgers (UNC '20)

I worked as a client advocate at the Orleans Public Defenders office. My job entailed working with clients, incarcerated or out on bail, to make sure that they're taken care of. This included a lot of medical advocacy work - requesting medical records, contacting the jail to get treatment for clients, etc. Another major activity was submitting rehab referrals for clients and asking the court to release the client from jail to the rehab facility while awaiting trial, and then transporting the client to rehab when the judge approved. Additionally, I conducted interviews and wrote briefs that were submitted to the court asking for reduced bail, and did many other "odd jobs" activities that various clients needed, ranging from enrolling a client's children in school and locating food donations to finding and housing a client's septuagenarian wife who was homeless in the French Quarter.

I would highly, highly recommend OPD to anyone who is interested and up to the task. However, it is crucial that scholars know themselves well enough to know if they are emotionally and mentally ready for the job. Having an honest conversation with someone like Vicki and discussing whether you'll be able to stay healthy under the immense stress and trauma inherent with OPD is vital to deciding whether or not it's the right job for you. But if you know you're up for it, it's simply the best internship you can get.

Priya Sridhar (UNC '20)

This summer, I worked at Orleans Public Defenders as a Client Advocate. By the end of the summer, I had worked with over 30 clients, providing them with one or more of the following services: bond advocacy, mental health/medical advocacy, wellness checks, rehabilitation intake screening, mitigation, and re-entry resources. Most of my clients were incarcerated at the time, so a typical day included either a jail visit or first appearance court shift in Magistrate Court.

I had an incredible time interning at OPD and living in the city of New Orleans. It was really fulfilling to get to know the employees in Client Services, and be able to exchange day-to-day experiences or struggles with them. (Pro-tip: Go out for some meals or host your co-workers for dinner to get to know them!)

Kalif Jeremiah (Duke '19)

I worked at the Orleans Public Defenders Office (OPD) in New Orleans. The vast majority of my time was spent in the Municipal (Misdemeanor) Court building, where the Public Defenders have a small office to the side. In this small office I would help update the system every morning with the new inmates that were processed overnight. In addition, I prepared folders with information on clients for the attorneys to use in their cases. The grunt of my work, however, came in the afternoon when I would go into one specific section of court (Section D) and get information from all of the inmates going before the judge that day and use that information to call family members and friends to try and get them out, either by coming down to court and advocating on their behalf or by paying bond. At times I helped inmates fill out forms for drug rehabilitation homes as well. Once or twice a day I went to the main office, located two blocks away, but usually just to get more paper or folders.

I really enjoyed working at OPD. It is more emotionally taxing than I thought it would be, but it still went well in my opinion. You get to see the inside of a very broken criminal justice system and soon you'll be complaining about how something doesn't work for the people as it should, just like everyone at OPD. New Orleans is a place that can use a lot of help, OPD specifically as well. You coming in for 2 months helps them out tremendously. They are also one of the most inviting groups of people that I've met. One of my biggest suggestions is to take public transportation to and from work. My commute on the streetcar every day was one of my highlights of the summer, I would look forward to it every day. All of the natives take the streetcar (don't call it the trolley or tram!) and it's an excellent way to jump right into the community. It's also pretty cheap (\$55 for a monthly unlimited). Make sure to go out and experience the live music in New Orleans, it will speak for itself. Make that double for the food as well.

Ellie Rodriguez (UNC '19)

I worked in the main office of OPD which handled felony cases. I worked in the client services division where I served as a middle ground between clients in jail, their legal counsel, their families and other services in the greater New Orleans area (mental health or rehab services most commonly). I covered magistrate court 3-5 times a week depending, including evening court some days. I worked 6, sometimes 7 days a week. I also did some graphic design work for an Equal Justice Campaign that operated within OPD offices and I helped to design their annual report. This

was the hardest job I've ever worked. I had never before seen that kind of trauma nor had I been witness to the systemic injustices of our criminal justice system and the justice system within Louisiana specifically.

It's really easy to focus on all the difficulties and hardships of this job. It's hard to go into work every day knowing that at best you might have very small, incremental process and at worst your client would be spending another day in jail because you hadn't gotten the right fax you needed. The office is a very high stress environment because everyone cares about their job so much. People overwork and work late all the time; self-care is not really prioritized in the office. On the one hand it's amazing to work with so many other fairly young people (almost everyone in the office is younger than 35) who all care so deeply, are so well educated and so deeply crave and fight for justice and change. On the other hand it's very easy to get swept up in everything. I felt like I was often being overwhelmed and crushed under the emotional aspect of the job; my heart bled for each one of my clients, and not being able to help them as quickly or as productively as I wanted to only exacerbated my frustrations. I know from speaking to other scholars who worked with me that their method of coping was often just compartmentalizing their feelings. I would strongly advise setting out time and space to feel everything and just be flooded with your emotions regarding this job. If you have a designated time and space I think you'd feel more in control. Lean on other scholars, but also lean on family and lean on people not immediately involved in everything. I really want to emphasize that even when you think you cannot bear to do this job any longer, you can. You can be emotional, you can be sad, you can be upset and you can still do this. I was under the impression that getting emotional about this job made you weak. That's very far from true. Be willing to put in work, be willing to see few results, celebrate the results you do see, and don't give up. If you always show up early and leave late you'll exhaust yourself. Instead, show up ready and leave open minded. This job often made me hate New Orleans, so it helped me a lot to go out and see all the beautiful, and culturally rich parts of the city when I had off work.

Most importantly, I want to stress that working at OPD was an immense privilege. I would not have wanted to work any other job this past summer, and I'm so glad I didn't. You'd have to actively work everyday not to learn something from this job. Take everything in, be upset, be shocked and be better.

Daya Uppal (UNC '19)

I worked with cases pertaining to the Criminal District Court in the Client Services Division (CSD) of Orleans Public Defenders (OPD). At the base level, the job entails covering First Appearances, which is interviewing defendants when they appear in court for the first time in order to contact their families to bond them out or getting them medicines/medical attention if they are in immediate need of that. Within the first few weeks, you get assigned cases where you coordinate your work with attorneys and law clerks and work in order to help the case in any way that you can. This mitigation can range from arranging a rehabilitation or educational program for an inmate to getting their medical records from various hospitals/medical centers to prove that the defendant is not mentally sound. My caseload specifically focused on medical advocacy for the incarcerated.

OPD taught me a lot of lessons. While I initially went in with hopes of creating a program for inmates or writing a research paper about medical treatment dissemination for the incarcerated, the internship required me to odd jobs. OPD humbled me enough to realize that while covering night court shifts, entering data, going on jail visits and arranging for housing may seem like menial tasks, these tasks were what the office needed to have done and instead of me attempting to create large-scale visible change in the system. Changes in small, case-by-case ways were what were necessary. Normally, I would advice you to not go into this job if you have larger goals for the summer than exactly what the office makes you do, but instead I will say that you should go do this job anyway. It will quickly teach you where your input and ideas are necessary and under which situations they are not.

Another important skill that I learned this summer was not only to be empathetic towards people's situations, but also to truly understand where people are coming from. When you're sitting in a jail booth and have an encounter with a twenty-year-old man suffering from bipolar disorder who is addicted to methamphetamine, you a) realize the inherent privileges you were given and the true value of sitting on your side of the jail booth and b) understand that this man's situation is not a manifestation of his lack of hard-work or bad decisions, it is simply the result of the basic opportunities he was never given.

You will learn many more lessons while working at OPD. You will learn from your CSD coworkers (who work tirelessly and often with little to no pay), your mentors, the attorneys (who all belong to top 10 law schools and could very easily be working at a top law firm instead and avoid the 18-20 hour workdays they currently have), the law clerks (who will be there for the summer like you are), the inmates, the jail staff and the downtown New Orleans area itself.

Finally, this is a mentally and emotionally heavy job. There are a multitude of realities that you will witness here that will leave you startled and questioning the existing nature of things. Moreover, this job has long time commitment in terms of the number of weeks you will work and the number of hours that it requires. I was required to work one shift every weekend as the Criminal District Court's CSD intern and was required to take the night court shift on some days (which means staying at the office until 10pm or later) and the morning shift some other days (which meant reaching the office at 8am).

*I would also recommend taking your car if you do decide to work at OPD since the commute to and from work otherwise is about 45 minutes long and requires taking a streetcar and a bus to get there.

Elle Winfield (Duke '19)

Jackson Skeen (Duke '18)

I covered first appearances in both Criminal District Court and Municipal Court, completed medical advocacy for clients in Criminal District Court, helped place clients into rehabilitation programs in Municipal Court, put together a thorough memo regarding the Two-for-One community service option in Municipal Court, and created an independent project regarding Probation Revocation Prevention for clients in Criminal District Court.

I would highly recommend this job. I worked comparatively long hours and dealt with emotionally difficult issues, but one is hard pressed, in my opinion, to find a more fulfilling job.

Joyce Lau (Duke '15)

OPD is the public defenders office for New Orleans. It is a fairly large office. At one time, it had one hundred lawyers but was probably 1/2-2/3 that size when I was there due to budget cuts. In addition to the legal side, OPD also has a client services branch, which is where Emelyn and I worked. The office handles any needs that clients may have that do not involve their case. As such, it is split up into Spanish translation, sex offenders, Department of Correction (this deals with ensuring that clients are not kept in jail longer than specified by their sentence), and medical advocacy. Given that Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate of any state in the country, OPD helps address many of the issues that lie at the crux of the prison system. As such, it is a great introduction to a city infamous for the flamboyant behavior of its inhabitants. Responsibilities- assist with first appearances: this involves attendance at court hearing, bond calls memo writing, and folder making- visit jails to perform medical intake- attend competency hearings for mental health patients- obtain medical records

This is a great job for someone who is pre-med (I'm not), pre-law, or someone interested in interacting with people from a completely different background than yourself and those you generally meet while at Duke or UNC. I learned a lot about random diseases, since you often need to research medications, treatment, etc. for clients. The job also has a good balance of paperwork and human interaction in the form of jail visits and competency hearings. No specific preparation necessary.

Emelyn Erickson (Duke '15)

Because I was one of two Spanish-speakers in the office, I worked almost exclusively with our Hispanic clients. As a result, my job involved a significant amount of interpreting and translation (for attorneys in court or during interviews, for investigators, of official office documents, etc), as well as all of the standard client-services tasks for our Hispanic clients (getting medical releases, collecting bond contacts, contacting family members to explain the bond process and what is going on in the client's case, etc.).

Be prepared to:

--divide your time among the courthouse, NOLA's several jails, the office, and the "field" (client's neighborhood, job site, hospital to get medical release, etc.)

--put in more than a 40 hour week. For the first two weeks, until the other interns and rest of the staff arrived, Joyce Lau and I were averaging 55-60 hour weeks (we worked nights and through the weekend, though our boss gave us Monday off to compensate). This calmed down some once the others got in. However, do expect to be working at least one night shift (from the end of the typical work day up till 9-10ish) and one weekend shift (2-5 hours-ish) doing first appearances in court outside of normal work hours.

--confront many of the inefficiencies and injustices of the criminal justice system on a daily basis. You will be doing some things that seem unnecessary, inefficient, poorly managed, etc. This can be frustrating

--work in the criminal justice system with the highest incarceration rate in the States.

--deal with criminals on a daily basis

--gain a completely new perspective toward the people society has dubbed "criminal"

--encounter as many or more victims as "villains"

--spend a lot of time in jail