

# Alyssa Phillips, EJW Fellow Interview



In early 2017, five AbbVie attorneys joined attorneys from Kirkland & Ellis to interview candidates for AbbVie's first Equal Justice Works Fellowship. The candidates were law students who had designed unique projects addressing critical needs for legal assistance in the Chicago area, in partnership with local legal aid organizations such as Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing, Uptown People's Law Center and Prairie State Legal Services.

While each student presented a strong case for funding their project, the selection committee unanimously chose Alyssa Phillips, J.D. 2017, Notre Dame. Her project, under the supervision of Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, focuses on the educational rights of homeless children.

"It was a tough decision," said Shira Kapplin, one of the interviewers, "But Alyssa's lifelong interest in this issue and her enthusiasm were compelling."

Alyssa began her fellowship in late summer 2017. One year into her project, Alyssa shared some of her insights and impressions.

### Tell us about your work. Who are your clients?

I'm working with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, focusing on educational rights of homeless children. My clients are families with children who are being kept out of school because they don't have a stable housing situation. They could be living in shelters or on the street, but often they're staying with friends or relatives temporarily. They have difficulties enrolling in public schools because schools sometimes demand proof of residency, and they can't provide it. This happens even though federal and state laws require public schools to enroll children immediately, allowing families time to provide documentation. Some of my clients are unaccompanied minors who are living separately from their families, often for traumatic reasons.

### What are some of the obstacles your clients face?

School bureaucracies in Chicago and the suburbs are complex and difficult to work with, even for someone like me who has studied these issues. There are charter schools and selective schools and even pre-school programs that have different processes and enrollment systems. Many homeless families don't know their legal rights and their children miss out on school while their parents try to navigate the bureaucracy. Unfortunately, many school employees haven't been trained and aren't aware of the legal protections for homeless students.

Alyssa's impact by the numbers nine months since beginning her project:



**28**

trainings of service providers completed



**15**

Back To School Fairs/Community Events where outreach was conducted



**10k+**

informational brochures about educational rights distributed



**70**

cases taken and resolved - 59 had a positive outcome for the student

# EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS®

## Alyssa's Project

**Sponsors:**  
AbbVie, Kirkland & Ellis

**Supervising organization:**  
Chicago Coalition for the Homeless



**Alyssa Philips**  
J.D. Notre Dame 2017

**Goal:**  
Support the educational rights of homeless students in the Chicago area through outreach, community education and direct representation

For additional information about Equal Justice Works, visit:  
<http://www.equaljusticeworks.org>

### What is a typical day like for you?

Two or three days per week I'm in the community doing outreach work. I might be visiting shelters, meeting staff and residents, or providing formal training to caseworkers and others about education laws and the rights of homeless students. I've distributed guides to educational rights at shelters, libraries, grocery stores, salons. I've also conducted mobile legal clinics, where I'll meet with clients at a shelter or other location. When I'm in the office, I'm often working on a case – writing letters or speaking with school administrators on behalf of a client.



## What have you learned that has surprised you?

People experience homelessness in many different ways. The typical perception of homelessness is of people living on the street or in shelters. We see many people who are staying temporarily doubled-up with friends or extended family. They're at risk of being displaced, for example, by a landlord because they are not on the lease. Although they may have a roof over their head, their situations are unstable.



## Lisa's story...

High school senior, "Lisa," was an unaccompanied youth, staying between various friends' homes on their couches; it was an unstable and unhealthy situation. The opportunity to move into a transitional living program for homeless youth became available. However, the new living situation was about 40 miles from the high school Lisa had attended since freshman year. Due to the distance and cost involved, the school stopped providing transportation. Lisa really wanted to graduate from her school and was doing well there. Alyssa and the CCH advocated for Lisa proving she was entitled to transportation. Lisa is looking forward to graduating with her class this spring.

## Lily's story...

"Lily" was a homeless youth and recent high school graduate. She was living at a transitional living program and planning to attend Parkland College in Champaign, IL.

Lily was denied financial aid because she could not obtain documents the college required. The documents were not required by law.

Through Alyssa's advocacy, the school agreed to accept alternate documents to prove financial need and Lily obtained financial aid. Lily is now thriving as a freshman in college.

## Are there unique challenges to working with homeless youth and families?

Communicating with clients can be difficult. Many don't have consistent internet access or cellphones. In addition, we're often working on urgent requests for help because clients don't know their rights and don't find us until a student has been denied enrollment and is unable to attend school.

“...children who attend pre-school are much less likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system and much more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. **Gaining access to pre-school can change the trajectory of a child's life.**”

- Alyssa Philips,  
J.D. Notre Dame 2017,  
Equal Justice Works Fellow

## What has been your most satisfying accomplishment so far?

Enrolling children in pre-school. It's so disheartening to see small children living in shelters or unstable situations. Usually their parents aren't aware that they have a right to attend public preschool. There's so much research and data showing that children who attend pre-school are much less likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system and much more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. Gaining access to pre-school can change the trajectory of a child's life. ♦