

2021 Summer Legal Fellows Reflect on Time with NCUIH

Category: Policy Blog

written by NCUIH | August 4, 2021

With the end of the summer comes the departure of our 2021 Summer Legal Fellows. With Bryn Whitney-Blum and Hayden Godfrey returning to their respective law schools, we asked them to reflect on their time with NCUIH. Please read their posts below. We wish them all the best as they complete their education!



My name is Bryn Whitney-Blum. I am a second-year law student at the George Washington University Law School, and I have a background in reproductive justice, maternal health, HIV/AIDS health care, and direct services. I applied to NCUIH as a legal fellow because of the unique opportunity to apply my interest in health equity and policymaking to serving urban Indian communities. The chance to advocate for a range of health care priorities within the framework of Indigenous sovereignty and justice set NCUIH apart from other internships, and I looked forward to applying my first year of legal education to congressional and federal policy.

At NCUIH, I learned about the incredible importance of persistent communication and advocacy in fulfilling the federal government's trust responsibility to urban Indians. NCUIH's policy team is full of powerhouse advocates, and after spending my summer working with this team I completely understand how NCUIH's work has led to millions in federal funding and legislative support for UIOs. As a policy fellow, I researched and drafted comments to federal agencies, tracked legislation and policy, attended urban confer and Tribal consultations, and even got to meet with Department of Justice officials to follow up on comments I had submitted on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons. At this fellowship, I translated the skills and principles I gained from law school to substantive policy advocacy, and my experience at NCUIH has added meaning and motivation to my professional path as a public interest lawyer. I am so grateful to Sunny, Julia, Meredith, Sam, Al, Elaina, Jenna, Mary, and Francys for sharing their knowledge and passion with me, and I look forward to seeing all they will continue to achieve for urban Indian health.



Osiyo nigada! My name is Hayden Godfrey and I am a second-year law student at the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law. I am Tsalagi and a federally enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. At Arizona Law, I am pursuing certification as a subject matter expert through our Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy program. I am also the President of the Arizona Law Chapter of the Native American Law Students Association (NALSA). The issues of sovereignty that impact our Tribal Nations are among the most critical issues that we face in Indian Country. Factors outside of our communities that seek to diminish our inherent nationhood threaten our very ways of life, preventing us from impactfully policing our communities, from protecting our friends and relatives from abduction or murder, and from attending to the health care needs of our Tribal members, among countless issues that arise out of broken trust obligations.

Through interviewing to become a Law Fellow with NCUIH, I felt that I would have an opportunity to devote the skills that I have honed through my legal studies to practically advocate for my Tribe and all others in our battles to improve the material conditions that we all suffer as the result of hundreds of years of genocidal Federal policy toward Indigenous people. Our fight for self-determination cannot reach its full potential until we have an Indigenous population that does not have to account for these historical traumas in our movement. NCUIH's mission, being the only such organization that serves the 70 percent of AI/AN people who reside in urban areas, myself included in that statistic as an urban Indian, fell ideally into my desires to fulfill the needs of my own demographic so that we can be a stronger political force in the future. Our sovereignty and our means for protecting our own populations arise out of our political relationship with Congress, which is why it is more imperative now than ever to stand up for our political rights.

I spent Summer 2021 employed with NCUIH, where I worked with the policy team to address issues in federal Indian policy as they arose in legislation and regulation at the agency level. As a Summer Law Fellow with NCUIH, I spent my time drafting comments for regulatory agencies on regulations involving Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs), tracking and editing acts of legislation that impact Indian health, performing substantive legal and policy research on Medicaid reimbursement rates for Indian health providers, and other policy-related tasks involving Tribal communities or culturally sensitive questions. My background as an American Indian and citizen of my Tribe ultimately permitted me to answer sensitive questions that arose in a thoughtful manner that incorporated my own Indigenous understanding of the subject matter. In law school, I learned to formulate air-tight legal arguments, while at NCUIH, I learned to be an advocate for all Indigenous people in the United States. Without my experiences this summer at NCUIH, I would not have the same capacity to bring the professional skills that I have cultivated into my future in Indian policy and activism.

I will always carry the memories from this summer at NCUIH with me as I stride into the future. I have learned so much in such a short amount of time. I would like to thank Julia, Meredith, Sunny,

and Francys for all that they have imparted during this all-too-short experience. They have been genuinely exemplary in their professionalism and zeal in their advocacy for communities much like my own. The passion and the drive that they bring into their activism will always remain with me in my own activism for the vulnerable communities whom we serve. I would accordingly like to express my gratitude for the privilege of serving Tribal communities this summer in our fight for equity, because I will derive my momentum from the passion that I have witnessed in you all. Wado.