

Lauren Bernstein
New York University
MPA Candidate, 2017
MA Candidate, Hebrew and Judaic Studies, 2017

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Summer Internship: Legislative Assistant, Anti-Defamation League, Washington D.C.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL)

The Anti-Defamation League was founded in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all." Now the nation's premier civil rights/human relations agency, ADL fights anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry, defends democratic ideals and protects civil rights for all.

Office of Government Relations and National Affairs, Washington D.C.

The Washington Office advances ADL's policy goals in the nation's capital by identifying emerging issues as they take shape and helping to craft legal, legislative, and policy responses. Currently the League is engaged in issues such as countering hate crimes and school bullying, criminal justice reform, safeguarding religious liberty and church-state separation, promoting LGBT equality, immigration reform, appropriately balancing national security concerns and individual rights, addressing global anti-Semitism, and promoting support for the Middle East peace process.

Legislative Assistant Position and Working in Washington

This legislative assistant position is necessary within agencies, organizations, and public offices in Washington D.C. My responsibilities included tracking legislation, attending congressional hearings, analyzing Supreme Court cases of interest to the ADL, conducting internet and legal research, and writing on legislative initiatives.

ADL's Government and National Affairs office is relatively small compared to the tremendous work they do, with four total staff members—including three registered lobbyists. Working directly with registered lobbyists in Washington D.C. during an election season was a privilege and an unparalleled opportunity. I worked most closely with ADL's Washington Counsel Michael Lieberman, who was honored in 2015 with the Attorney General's Award for Meritorious Public Service for "Outstanding Contributions to Combat Hate Crimes." This Award is the top public service award granted by the Department. It is difficult to quantify the immense professional and personal growth I achieved from working with Mr. Lieberman, alongside the other staff members that perform this crucial work for the Jewish community as well as the civil rights community.

Portfolios

As a large, 103 year-old Jewish institution with 28 regional offices, the ADL is involved in many aspects of securing justice and fair treatment for all. In the Government and National Affairs office, I was responsible for tasks related to the following portfolios:

- Boycott, Divest, and Sanction Israel Movement
- Global Anti-Semitism
- Criminal justice reform
- Refugees crisis
- Immigration

While this may seem like a diverse and unrelated list of topics, all activities revolve around making the world more secure and just for all minority groups. Working to advance favorable policies within all of these areas is ultimately a strategy to ensure justice and fair treatment for the Jewish community.

Deliverable Highlights

Throughout my time at ADL, I had the opportunity to participate in various meetings, complete research projects, compile data, create visual representations of that data, and write reports. Below I have highlighted more significant projects that directly support the intersection of the missions of both the ADL and the JKR Foundation.

Anti-BDS Legislation Chart

With the growing support of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction Israel movement, the United States has seen a backlash of anti-BDS state legislation, which prevents states from engaging with organizations that are involved with the BDS movement. Anti-BDS legislation symbolically, if not effectively, dampens the momentum of the BDS movement in the United States. According to the ADL, anti-BDS legislation also dampens free speech that is unequivocally protected by the Constitution. In the past, the ADL has actively lobbied against anti-BDS legislation, and now remains neutral by abstaining from legislative efforts to battle BDS. The ADL must intricately balance its unequivocal support of free speech and the Constitution, which serves to protect the Jewish people, and efforts to delegitimize Israel.

In order to help create this balance, I was tasked with analyzing the anti-BDS state legislation. I dissected and categorized the legislation according to common themes found in all of the state bills. The categories I enumerated included: number of votes in the House and Senate, whether the bill is Israel-specific, if it includes the compilation of a list of companies engaging in prohibited activity, entities covered by the legislation, and limitations of the legislation such as contractual dollar thresholds. Since the ADL is currently abstaining from supporting or blocking legislative efforts to battle BDS, this information preemptively attempts to gather information should the need for a statement or legislative advocacy arise. The Anti-BDS Legislation chart I made was sent out to the regional offices and executives at the ADL to help guide and inform decision-making.

During my time at ADL, Governor Cuomo of New York issued an executive order—the first of its kind—directing the divestment of public funds that support the BDS movement. I compiled a list of media articles in agreement and in opposition of this

executive order, information that helped ADL executives make decisions on whether or not to release a statement, and if so what the messaging should be.

Working on this project immersed me in reading and analyzing legislation, which is a language in itself and a skill that will surely enhance my future career in public service. It also exposed me the divisions and tensions within the organized Jewish communities, and how a Jewish institution can carefully walk the line on Israel issues and stay true to its mission without alienating partisan donors and supporters. This work will certainly help me continue the fight against BDS on my campus.

Global Anti-Semitism

For the past two years, the ADL won a government contract from the State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism. The ADL designed and implemented grassroots programs to combat anti-Semitism in Greece and Hungary—two countries identified as having some of the highest levels of anti-Semitism in the Eastern Europe, and the world.

I was tasked with helping to draft the completion report for these projects. Through this task, I was permitted to sift through all of the project files and learn how the grassroots program was conducted. I learned strategies and tactics to reduce anti-Semitism at the grassroots level – much of which includes coalition building between local community organizations, as well as an educational curriculum taught by instructors that the local communities can identify with.

Anti-Muslim Bigotry Tracking Document

The ADL participates in a vast array of civil rights and civil liberties coalitions in accordance with its mission to secure justice and fair treatment for all, especially since this also secures civil rights for the Jewish people. As a defense institution, the ADL never forgets that Jews remain a minority group whose rights should not be taken for granted, despite their apparent success in contemporary America. In this sentiment and with rising Islamophobia, the ADL plays a leading role in exposing and combating anti-Muslim bigotry.

I was tasked with compiling a 160-page document tracking the ADL's press releases and statements, blog posts, news articles, joint-letters, social media, and educational materials. This resource was distributed to our coalition partners to help strengthen their ability to fight anti-Muslim bigotry. The document also serves as a record of all the anti-Muslim incidents and hate crimes that have occurred. From my experience at the ADL, I learned how crucial it is to keep clear records to back up claims, because there will always be opposition parties that seek to deny claims of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and all forms of bigotry. These records can be used by lobbyists to advocate for protective legislation and strengthen civil protections for minority groups.

Steve King Bigotry Compilation

I was also tasked with compiling a document of biased and bigoted statements and legislative actions from Congressman Steve King (R-Iowa) to document his racially charged and white supremacist statements—a position the ADL vehemently opposes. I learned that it is crucial to track and call out such statements, as well as track the history of an individual who consistently espouses bigotry.

Analyzing Movement for Black Lives Policy Platform

The Jewish community was split on the Movement for Black Lives policy platform that was released this past summer because of its references to Israel as an “apartheid state” that commits “genocide” against the Palestinian people. The ADL again found itself negotiating the line between advocating for racial justice and constitutional protections and positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. I played a crucial role in analyzing the Movement for Black Lives statement and determining the extent and scope of which Israel was included in the platform—which was relatively very small compared to the 50,000 word document where Israel was mentioned only 11 times. This information helped craft ADL’s reaction to the statement, allowing them to call out the movement for its erroneous assertions regarding Israel, while standing in solidarity with critical civil rights issues that merit attention. I was able to see the statement transform from my analysis.

Interfaith Week of Action to elevate Supreme Court Vacancy

True to its strategy, the ADL worked with a coalition to help lead an Interfaith Week of Action to help elevate the Senate’s inaction on the Supreme Court vacancy. I had the opportunity to work with other Jewish organizations including NCJW, which was helpful for my career. I learned how to use community organizing to elevate an important issue. The strategies included grassroots community conference calls, social media campaigns including videos, Senate call-ins, press tele-conferences, and delivering letters to Senate leadership. I also learned the importance of the interfaith community standing together on important issues.

While this is not a comprehensive list of projects that I worked on at the ADL (I spent significant time on advocacy for refugees as well as immigration), these projects were most aligned with the JKR Foundation’s mission.

Lessons Learned

My experience at the ADL was incredibly profound and unlike any internship experience I have had before—it gave me a vast understanding of legislative advocacy, civil society in Washington D.C., Jewish institutional structure, coalition building, and organizational moral courage. I got an up-close-and-personal look at working in civil society and in public service and my skills were utilized at the appropriate level, which was important to me as a graduate student. Here is a more specific list of lessons learned:

1. **Coalition building:** Coalition Building is critical to advocacy work within the Jewish community and all minority communities. I have the skills to form and sustain coalitions, and this may be a good place for me to search for post-grad career options.
2. **Balancing bipartisan issues:** Nonprofit organizations must legally remain bipartisan, and separate standing up for what is right with the partisan issues on The Hill. In recent years, sometimes issues of fair treatment and justice for all become partisan issues, which created challenges for Jewish nonprofits. ADL was careful to remain nonpartisan. For example, I was tasked with equally covering ADL issues at both the Republican and Democratic National Convention.
3. **Arab-Israeli Conflict:** Where Israel was previously the “great uniter” within the Jewish community, Israel is now the “great divider.” Despite its divisiveness, Jewish organizations must clarify their position on the conflict to retain integrity. This can be complicated with donor relations, but organizations can and should be morally courageous in their positions.
4. **Lobbying and Policy Windows:** There are certain times when issues can and should be elevated, and certain times when organizations must wait for a policy window to open so that time and resources are not wasted. Our political system in the U.S. is such that passing important and comprehensive legislation is a long slog—it takes time. Lobbyists and organizers are often willing to wait decades to get important legislation passed without significant compromises—and activists should know what they are willing to compromise on, as well as which hill they are willing to die on. I determined that I do have the skills to lobby, although I am not sure if this is possible without a Law degree.
5. **Data Matters:** I learned the importance of tracking incidents and events, as well as the importance of archiving information that can be used as evidence to support claims of bias and bigotry, and subsequently change policies.
6. **Moral Courage:** I am very proud of the positions that the ADL takes on all of the issues I learned about while I was there, and in that sense this was a very good fit. I felt that at least in my department, there was a tremendous amount of moral courage, of standing up for what the organization believes in, of standing in solidarity and advocacy with Jews and all minority communities, including communities of faith, and of taking action on critical issues that affect the civil liberties for all Americans as well as in the international community.

Thanks to support from the JKR Foundation, I was able to spend a summer learning, growing, and exploring, which will inform my career path in the Jewish communal sector.