Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.

The first week on the job consisted of many trainings on TennCare, Coverkids, SLMB, and other Tennessee Medicare programs that our clients were enrolled in or facing challenges enrolling in. On the very first day, I was trained on what we call “intake”. The intake process consists of calling back a potential client - who has already expressed a need - and completing a general assessment of their situation; this includes their needs, their legal standings, their incomes, their assets, etc. Then, we notify them that their case will be reviewed and they will receive a call back informing them of whether we accept or deny the case. Nonetheless, we ask them to keep every letter and envelope they receive from the respective office they are fighting against. By the second day, I was completing these intakes on my own. By the fourth day, I was training new interns on how to complete these themselves. The TJJC is actually developing a system (which already won an award) in which one could run a client and their family through and discover their eligibility for the various programs, and even their eligibility for tax credits and the such. The program is called AskJane, after a woman named Jane in the office whom is the go-to for all health care questions.

During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?

Although it may not sound like a difficult task, intake is usually the first time these clients have contacted an office that is willing to listen. Many clients are depressed, desperate, and feeling hopeless. It is crucial to reassure each client that we will try our best to assist them, while not making any promises regarding the outcome of the intake or the case if it is accepted. What is more difficult is creating timelines of what occurred and when, especially since the TennCare system often doesn’t
send letters or emails notifying clients, which leaves many clients with just as many questions as we have ourselves. In fact, many intake calls (and cases) become mazes. Many clients call us because they were rejected from the doctor’s office, and they were never notified of a change. It is there that they begin to investigate what happened. By the third week, I did not need many pointers on what questions to tell our potential clients to ask, as I started to figure out the TennCare system and the several flaws that TJC was repeatedly hearing about.

By the second week, I was being assigned clients, while being in charge of entering and reviewing all intakes. This was new and exciting, especially since several of these clients were the very individuals that I had started to form relationships with through the several calls from intake. That being said, I was expected to catch up and understand the many unknowns of the processes. For example, many clients do not know what benefits they receive from the Social Security Administration—is it SSDI, SSI, Retirement? The reasons that matters is because it defines what incomes are taxable or not, thus clarifying their modified adjusted gross income (MAGI), which is crucial for eligibility. More than that, if a client receives SSI, they are instantly eligible for TennCare, which defines what type of case we will have. Similarly, if a client needs (and qualifies for) in-home care, they will be enrolled in TennCare automatically.

Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?

So what does one do when someone is sick and categorically ineligible for help? Sadly, these cases aren’t rare. I have answered phones to survivors of violence, poverty, cancers, severe brain damage, and so many more who can not qualify for health insurance simply because they don’t make enough or because Tennessee did not expand Medicaid. Many of our clients feel as if we are their last hope, and unfortunately we have to turn many away - not because we don’t have the capacity, but because the law is written against them. For some, the best I could do was enroll them in CoverRx, a prescription program that lowers the prices of prescriptions for those not eligible for any other federal or state program; the program, however, did nothing to help those in need not afford the doctor’s visits to get the prescriptions. For others, the best we could do was refer them to Legal Aid, which would help them enroll through the Marketplace in November, when the marketplace re-opens.

As for Sewanee, what benefited me the most from my education was my attention to detail. Often times, it was the attention to the fine print that allowed me to help a client.

In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?

While at the TJC, I was to handle all Spanish speaking clients, as I was the only person in the office who spoke the language. This exposed myself and my coworkers to completely new sets of issues that we were to navigate together. This especially became an issue when working with migrants. Many undocumented immigrants were confused as to the system in America. For example, one woman reported her children having health care, when in fact they were simply going to the health department. Other immigrants feared reporting their household sizes and family member identities, especially with the changes in political leaders. Others did not know their legal standing, and worse, were possibly being represented by notaries instead of lawyers, but they didn’t know which credentials to check for. For those with legal status, the situation was not easier. In fact, there is a five year bar for U.S. green card holders, meaning they can not enroll regardless of eligibility. While at the TJC, I helped create ways to reach out to Latino Americans, eventually tabling at a food donation center, reaching out to those in need and helping a high school intern come up with a how-to guide for advocates assigned foreign clients.
As for in the office, it was important to explain the varying situations and possible outcomes to the other advocates. It actually created dialogue that created more questions, which is good because we all had to research. More than that, it pushed me to handle extra cases and work with other advocates to hopefully provide assistance.

How did your internship affect your career plans?
My time at the TJC solidified my desire to advocate for clients in need. In fact, I found myself not wanting to leave work, seeing the many clients that I had formed relationships with and continuously desired to help. Nonetheless, I was able to see my aptitude for legal work, and my dislike for a monotonous day. I am hoping to return to the TJC as a VISTA after graduation.

I will forever be grateful for this internship and funding, as I was able to serve the Tennessee community while learning the processes that hinder our health. Furthermore, the office was beyond courteous, kind, and enthusiastic to all interns. They made every question feel valid, and every mistake feel fixable. I could not have worked in a better environment.

In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons’ perspectives?
Unfortunately, although we work very hard on health care, our clients often need a more holistic approach. Thus, we are often referring clients to many other offices (legal aid, food banks, rent/utilities assistance charities) in hopes of helping them survive. I myself have had an ongoing conversation with our local congressman’s office, hoping to get one of our uninsured clients Supplemental Security Income (SSI), so he isn’t evicted while he is fighting stage 4 cancer. Unfortunately, he was denied of SSI because he had an extra car (aside from the legally exempt one), valued at less than $500, which meant that he had too much in assets to qualify for help. Others were disabled widows, who lost their Medicaid because of “too much income” from disability payments. Through this job, I was able to connect with people of all backgrounds who suffered from the same laws. Honestly, it showed me how so many lives could take different paths and end up with the same challenges.

Words of advice for future interns (housing, transportation, etc.)?
My advice is to look for the Vanderbilt rotating rooms website. Many nurses and doctors rent out spare rooms for rotations, which means they expect you to come stay but also go relatively soon- so they don’t worry about asking for security deposits and the likes. This is where I found my room, and I even got a spot in the parking garage!

Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:
Whenever I listen to NPR, I hear stores on the ACA, medicare, etc. Quickly, one can become desensitized to what all of those discussions and policy shifts actually mean. In fact, I can’t think of many Sewanee students or faculty that were actively discussing TennCare. I had a glimpse into that world before my internship because I made a point of getting to know all of the staff in the dorms and the dining hall.

All of this is to say, without this internship, I would have never had such easy access to both fine detail within policy writing and direct outcomes of each and every written law. This internship allowed me to grow relationships with clients and understand the desperation of their experience. At the same
time, I would hang up and have to go to a training that explained why, under current provisions, some clients had no options.

At the end of the day, the funding is what allowed all of this to happen. I could have never afforded rent or living expenses in a new city by myself. I hope that, through my report, you are able to see the long way I took each of your dollars. I can not thank you enough.