

# Emily Neely: Helping Families Affected by Opioids

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After graduation, this 2021 WVU Law graduate will provide alternative dispute resolution to low-income families in opioid-impacted child custody cases.



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May 2021

Emily Neely has been a public service powerhouse throughout her law school career, both as a leader in student organizations and as a student attorney.

Soon, thanks to a prestigious fellowship award, the 2021 WVU Law graduate will serve her community as a mediator for families affected by the opioid epidemic.

“Over 41,000, or nearly 11 percent, of West Virginia’s children are living with relatives, primarily due to parental substance use issues,” Neely explained. “My home community has been particularly affected, and I want to apply my interest in family law and alternative dispute resolution to address this issue.”

After graduation, Neely will work as an Equal Justice Works Fellow for Legal Aid of West Virginia in Martinsburg. She was among just 77 law school graduates chosen for the 2021 EJW Fellowship out of a pool of more than 460 applicants.

Founded by law students in 1986, Equal Justice Works is a nonprofit organization that connects law students, lawyers, legal services organizations and supporters to promote legal careers in public service and equal access to justice.

“Emily’s passion for helping West Virginians recovering from substance use disorder and regain control of their lives is incredibly inspiring,” said Kristen Uhler-McKeown, vice president of fellowships at Equal Justice Works. “We are thrilled to support her

<https://www.law.wvu.edu/spotlight/emily-neely-helping-families-affected-by-opioids>

Fellowship and look forward to seeing the impact of her work at Legal Aid of West Virginia.”

During her two-year fellowship, which is sponsored in part by the Foundation for Opioid Response Efforts, Neely will provide alternative dispute resolution to low-income families as they work towards agreements in opioid-impacted custody cases.

“Legal issues stemming from the opioid epidemic are complex and often very personal. Alternative dispute resolution gives parties a chance to learn how to resolve their own disputes and come to practical and sustainable solutions, thereby reducing trauma to the children involved,” she said.

Neely realized her passion for conducting mediations in her first year at WVU Law, when she joined the Alternative Dispute Resolution Society. She volunteered in West Virginia’s Magistrate Court mediation program as a member of the ADR Society, gaining firsthand exposure to the positive impact alternative dispute resolution can make on clients.

“Particularly in family law, research shows that people suffering from substance use disorder who participate in alternative dispute resolution feel more in control over the outcome of their legal matter, which supports their recovery significantly,” said Neely. “For example, a father with substance use disorder may be more motivated to complete a recovery program if he plays a role in creating a visitation schedule with his child.”

Neely has remained active in public service efforts during her time as a law student; in addition to her involvement in ADR Society, she was a student attorney in the [Child and Family Advocacy Law Clinic](#). She also served as president of the Community Service Council, president of [Public Interest Advocates](#) and the vice president on the West Virginia Fund for Law in the Public Interest.

Public Interest Advocates is a student group at WVU Law that raises money to help sponsor summer and post-graduate fellowships that supports their classmates to work in public interest organizations throughout the state.

PIA supports the West Virginia Fund for Law in the Public Interest, which has sponsored hundreds of public interest fellowships to enhance the quality of legal services for low-income West Virginians and to help law students achieve a deeper appreciation for the importance of public-interest work.



Throughout the 2020-21 school year, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Neely led PIA through fundraising efforts including an outdoor yard sale, a highly popular pet calendar and a law school-wide Halloween scavenger hunt.

As president of the Community Service Council, she helped organize a successful food drive that collected more than 11,000 items, as well as an Angel Tree donation drive that provided gifts and clothing to 50 local children in need.

Her passion for public service also translated into summer work experience while earning her law degree.

During the spring 2020 semester, Neely completed a part-time externship at the Morgantown office of Legal Aid of West Virginia. In the summer of 2019, she worked as an Equal Justice Works Rural Summer Legal Corps Fellow with her post-grad employer, Legal Aid of West Virginia in Martinsburg. It was during this time that her alternative dispute resolution project began forming, with help and mentorship of an attorney working near her hometown.

Brenda Waugh, an attorney that serves clients in West Virginia and the Washington, DC, area, specializes in collaborative law and a variety of mediation methods. In Summer 2019, she shared her insights and experiences surrounding alternative dispute resolution with Neely. Then, with help from Legal Aid of West Virginia, the two began developing Neely's project to bring alternative dispute resolution mediation to low-income West Virginians.

"WVU Law enabled me to make connections with mentors who made my mediation project possible, and it empowered me with the training I need to implement it," Neely said. "This project could not have been realized without the support and guidance from people at the College of Law like my Civil Procedure professor [Charles DiSalvo](#), or [Jennifer Powell](#), the director of the [Center for Law and Public Service](#), as well as from Brenda Waugh and all the wonderful people at Legal Aid of West Virginia. I am eternally grateful to them."

## Meet Emily Neely



Neely is from Gerrardstown, West Virginia, near Martinsburg. She graduated from WVU in 2018 with bachelor's degrees in political science and philosophy. At WVU Law, she has earned two CALI awards for the highest grade in Civil Procedure and Legal Analysis, Research and Writing.

Neely attended WVU Law as a recipient of the [West Virginia Bar Foundation Public Service Scholarship](#). She graduated with Pro Bono Distinction honors and a Community Service Award.