

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
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Dear Dan,

I am grateful to Equal Justice America for awarding me a Summer 2022 Fellowship. I spent this summer as a law student intern with the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC), and it was a gratifying experience. Through the Clean Slate Clinic, I was able to work on issues addressing the decriminalization of poverty. This subject interests me because of my experience growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles. Growing up poor, I witnessed my parents' and community's struggle to make ends meet. I am glad I could bring my experience to understand and advocate for our clients in Alameda County. I worked under the supervision of a clinical attorney to help our clients address and resolve issues of predatory municipal debt, fines, and fees. Apart from working with driven and passionate legal advocates, they were kind and patient with me as I navigated this legal work for the first time.

My work involved client intakes of people with traffic and parking tickets, driver's license suspensions, DUI records, and vehicle registration holds, among other issues. These issues create significant obstacles for low-income community members. Many people with a bad driving record or a suspended license may not be able to apply for jobs requiring specific occupational licenses. This creates barriers for people wanting to create better opportunities for themselves simply because they cannot afford to pay off the municipal debt. By carrying this debt on their shoulders, people struggle to get to work, take their children to school, or visit the doctor.

I analyzed driving records and worked with my supervisor on DMV advocacy for people experiencing issues with their driving records. One client believed his wage garnishment happened because of his driving record. After reviewing his driving record and contacting several agencies, we determined the cause of his wage garnishment and assisted him with the next steps to get back on track. This taught me a lot about communicating with clients, following up with them, being transparent, and dealing with state agencies.

Admission into the Homeless and Caring Court program may be a reprieve for some Alameda County residents facing mounting municipal debt. In conducting client intakes, I was able to prepare applications for the Homeless and Caring Court. Participation in the diversionary program led to county citations being dismissed, clearing the path for many to reinstate driver's licenses, access public benefits, obtain employment, and more. I assisted an unhoused single mother with her application. Assuming her application was accepted, this would allow her to begin regaining her driver's license, possibly get a job promotion, and make things easier for her and her children.

Policy advocacy for people experiencing homelessness was a central part of my internship this summer. I conducted legal research and wrote memoranda on the city of Oakland's encampment management policies and an Oakland city council member's proposal for vehicularly housed encampments. I also drafted an advocacy letter and talking points for an Oakland city council subcommittee meeting. Finally, I co-authored a memorandum on homeless court programs in Northern and Central California. My partner and I presented our findings on homeless courts to a coalition group, providing them with a framework for future advocacy. We were excited to speak about our research with other lawyers, community organizers, and impacted people. Hopefully, our work will lead to some significant change one day.

I am thankful for the opportunity to work with EBCLC and the team at the Clean Slate Clinic. Through this experience, I became a more vigorous legal advocate, reaffirming that pursuing a career in public interest is my calling. I also left a more empowered woman of color, knowing that the legal field needs my viewpoint and input. I hope folks can see the incredible impact that EJA is making by supporting law students like me who want to make a difference in our communities. It means the world to me that EJA believed in me, and I hope to continue this work in the future. Thank you once again for the support through the 2022 Summer Fellowship.

All the best,

Leslie Estrada Flynn
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