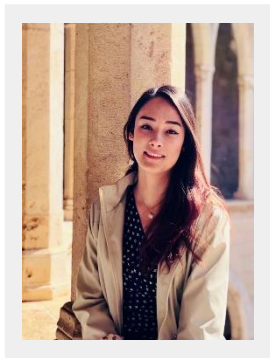




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: Starting work this summer at a legal aid organization, I was most nervous about interacting with clients – knowing that legal aid orgs need all the support they can get, I was intimidated by my responsibilities. My worst fear would be making a huge mistake that directly harmed a client already in an incredibly vulnerable position. Fortunately, with my first 2 and a half weeks on the job, my experiences have been positive. I was charged with interviewing a client for a wage nonpayment claim, and I was surprised by how well our conversation went despite the fact that I used an interpreter. Once I learned about the client's position and experiences with their employer, all my anxiety about the technical details of a client interview went away, and I focused only on doing as much as I could to support their case, writing a demand letter to their employer and keeping them updated on the process and timeline to ease their own worries. I've overall been incredibly energized by the work I've done so far. Even with my legal limited skill set, I feel empowered to put those skills to use and use the obstacles I encounter on the job to motivate my future career goals. Since I am working in employment law, almost all the clients whose cases I've worked on so far are undocumented, and while I am happy to be able to provide the legal support they need, I often wonder how many workers are not having their needs met. I'm hoping to get more involved in community organizations with my current internship to educate underprivileged groups about the resources available to them no matter their immigration status, so that undocumented residents feel comfortable seeking legal remedies without fear of retaliation or deportation.

Update 2: Over the first few weeks of my internship, I've seen many cases start up - I've done multiple intakes and jumped onto existing cases that have dragged on without resolution. However, this week I finally saw one of the cases I've worked on since the start get resolved, and was so excited to be able to tell my client that their former employer had agreed to settle. This news was doubly welcome as the employer's prior hostility to settlement had made it seem that filing a complaint was the only option for my client to be compensated for weeks of unpaid labor under this employer. I've always been more interested in "behind the scenes" legal work than trial advocacy, so it was nice to see how beneficial it could be for a case to stay entirely out of court. Although the client could have been awarded more damages had the case gone to trial, I understood their decision to settle - for clients with very little or no income, the guarantee of settlement compensation is a far



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

better outcome than dragging out litigation where they could lose their case, all while being further impacted by the stress of trial and no immediate income.

Update 3: As I continue to work with employment law cases, I have begun to further understand the importance of prioritizing a client's goals and balancing them with what may result in the best legal outcome. One social issue I looked forward to combatting during this internship is employment discrimination, as I wanted to help protect marginalized workers and not allow employers to get away with abusing their employees. I am now currently working on two employment discrimination cases, but rather than going after the employers' guns blazing, I have been first helping both clients apply for unemployment insurance and other benefits. As both clients are in vulnerable situations, I realized it is far more important to help them get on some more stable footing before taking any legal action that could create a worse relationship with their former employers. For example, for one client who has not yet been paid for vacation time accrued over many years of work, my supervising attorney and I decided we should first apply for benefits, then contact the employer about paying out the vacation time, and only after that should we proceed with a discrimination claim. Reflecting on these cases, I know that young students such as myself who are interested in social justice issues may initially be most galvanized by broadly "bringing justice" to those who wrong others - in the case of civil litigation, going after bad actors. However, in the legal aid sphere, I must remember that the helping a client attain their goals is the best way to right employers' wrongs, even if that client decides not to sue their employer.

Update 4: I'm finishing up my last week at my internship, which is pretty bittersweet. I've really enjoyed the work I engaged in over the summer, and now plan on focusing on employment law over the next two years of law school. I am very grateful to have worked with a team that was so inspiring and energizing, and gave me and my co-interns the resources to do substantive work throughout the summer. Some of the cases I've worked on are not closed and one is even ramping up, and I've decided to continue working on that case as a volunteer through the upcoming semester alongside a staff attorney. Overall, this summer experience has solidified my interest in employment law and is making me seriously consider a career in legal aid after graduation.

Update 5: Having first entered law school unsure of whether I wanted to even become a practicing attorney, instead focusing solely on policy work after graduation, this summer's internship has been a transformative experience in shaping my future career path. Prior to law school, I thought I would want to pursue a career that would allow me to create systemic change rather than individual change. Having heard from a few people who worked in legal aid specifically, I was half preparing myself to feel burnt out, perhaps even discouraged by the severity of the cases I would encounter.

Instead, I've left this summer feeling quite certain that I want to pursue a career in legal aid as well as policy. Although the majority of my cases this summer involved instances of injustice against my clients, I felt energized to advocate on their behalf and inspired to do more. Speaking with clients from various backgrounds helped me understand how the unemployment laws and situations I worked with actually affected people. I'm excited to carry forward my passion and the skills I've learned into student clinic this upcoming semester, where I can begin thinking about how to address the systemic issues I observe through my cases.