



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Law School:** New York Law School

**Organization:** The HIV Law Project

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**Update 1:** I had the privilege of being awarded a summer fellowship through Equal Justice America. Through EJA, I am a part of a network of law students around the country who have made it their mission to pursue careers in the public interest field. I will be posting periodic updates throughout the summer to be shared within the EJA network and with you all, so read at your leisure!

As I begin my second week interning with The HIV Law Project and Housing Works, I find myself constantly reminded how necessary accessible and authentic representation is for a (hopefully someday) equitable legal system.

The HLP serves those who are living with HIV in matters such as obtaining social security benefits, public assistance, various immigration processes, and housing rights advocacy. Already, I have learned so much about the systems that be, and their disproportionate impact upon these members of our community.

Public interest work is tireless and requires a deep commitment to justice, which is something I am so thankful to witness from those I am working with. I am looking forward to the rest of the summer learning from the wonderful humans of the HLP, as well as connecting with my Equal Justice America Fellows.

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**Update 2:** I often speak about the importance of public interest work and direct services in the legal field, and unfortunately this work is as urgent as ever. The past several weeks of SCOTUS decisions and political whiplash has left myself, and members of my communities, feeling extremely vulnerable – a feeling that is all too familiar.

Also, during the past few weeks, I have had the privilege of witnessing the resilience and fury of my peers and colleagues. Working in the legal field comes with a privilege and burden of understanding the nuances of these rulings, and the responsibility to prepare for what inevitably will follow.



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I am always in awe of Housing Works and The HIV Law Project, and their tireless efforts to provide equitable legal access to the community. Last week a brave group of Housing Works employees and affiliates boarded a bus to Washington DC at 4:30am to partake in civil disobedience in response to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Although I was unable to attend this time, I look forward to serving as a legal observer at demonstrations down the line, which I am sure there will be plenty.

In the meantime, I am grateful to work in a space within this field that thrives on communal solidarity. I am especially grateful to be surrounded by lawyers who have made it their mission to ensure that legal representation is more accessible than yesterday, every day.

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**Update 3:** In the past couple weeks, I have continued to learn and grow under the guidance of the wonderful teams of The HIV Law Project and Housing Works. This week in particular, I had the opportunity to personally connect with some of our clients, which is a treat during my remote workdays.

As someone who has worked their share of customer service jobs from barista to bartender, I pride myself on knowing how to interact with strangers and deal with difficult people. Sometimes people skills come naturally, and sometimes they come from customers tossing (perfectly good) iced lattes at you.

When I make phone calls whether it be to clients directly or the Social Security Administration, I brace myself for who I will be met with on the other end of the line. I understand that not everyone is able to bring their best selves to difficult conversations, and the added pressures of legal action often only exacerbate this stress.

However, something that I was entirely unprepared for happened during a client phone call this week. A long phone call regarding immigration application formalities quickly became the highlight of my day. This client effortlessly brought joy, humor, and care to the conversation, and made it known how grateful he was for our assistance. While he was all too modest about his pure resilience that has gotten him to this position, it was truly surprising to hear such heartfelt gratitude on a Friday morning.

Nonprofit and direct services lawyers meet people exactly where they are at, which is often a very difficult and emotional place. Even so, human spirit and connection can be found anywhere.

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**Update 4:** As I approach the sunset of my time with Housing Works and The HIV Law Project, I find myself in the same learning mindset I had back in June. Although by now I have developed routines and familiarity with my work, each day brings a new challenge and opportunity.

This week in particular, I spoke with a number of clients who, fortunately, have received access to the Monkeypox vaccine. As a regular consumer of media, political and social alike, I have witnessed the concerning narrative surrounding the Monkeypox outbreak - as I am sure we all have.



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The official approach to confronting this virus is nothing new, in the worst way. It is not difficult to note the concerning similarities between Monkeypox coverage and that of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Also similarly, QPOC and those without adequate access will experience the brunt of the suffering that is to come, and clearly already has.

I am proud to work within an organization that has been extremely vocal about local and state demands and emergency action efforts. Until vaccine accessibility is made a priority and steps are taken to support those without economic flexibility and healthcare access, circumstances will only get more dire.

By now we are no strangers to public health emergencies or discrimination of/within the Queer community, but I truly hope that we are able to avoid past mistakes for the sake of all. In the meantime, keep up with local organizations and community members for calls to action, and most importantly stay safe.

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**Update 5:** This summer working with the HIV Law Project was incredibly rewarding on many levels. New York City is fast paced and progressive, but it is also a time capsule for the decades of the past. While the HIV/AIDS crisis is often viewed as a catastrophic relic from history, reality reveals that the crisis lives on – particularly so amongst hyper marginalized communities.

The HIV Law Project's mission is to provide equitable access to legal representation to low-income individuals who are living with HIV. In doing so, they specialize in matters of benefits law, housing law, and immigration law. This summer I found myself working primarily in benefits law, with a surprising involvement in immigration law; surprising to myself considering I had no prior experience whatsoever and was considerably intimidated by the field.

During my time working with our immigration clients, I had the opportunity to meet individuals from across the world with life experiences that starkly contrast my own. The concept of immigration law initially terrified me. How could I be responsible for the course of someone's life, at the risk of their physical wellbeing? Surely, this pressure is not something I would seek out...and then I did.

Over the summer, I worked closely with a client who had already been granted asylum status, and was now beginning the process of a status change to a green card. Our first phone call was formal, for the purpose of confirming the data on an immigration form and asking follow up questions. However, the warmth and kindness that radiated from his end of the phone made this daunting call feel like a conversation with an old friend.

I have never in my life experienced more grace and compassion than from this client, and I am honored to have cultivated a relationship with them over the summer. During an in office meeting, they shared with me that if



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they had not received Asylum status, they would have “put [themselves] to sleep”. The thought of this world being robbed of their presence shook me, and I felt incredibly blessed to be able to assist them in the dense legalities of their safety. A responsibility that I once felt only fear and anxiety towards, was now a connection between myself and someone who was courageous enough to pursue a life that grants them safety and opportunity.

This client, along with several others, made clear to me that I see a future for myself in the realm of direct services and human rights law. Human connection is a priceless thing, too often taken for granted in the times before COVID. I cannot imagine pursuing a legal career in service of anything other than the needs of people and the pursuit of equity. I am forever grateful to the HIV Law Project for confirming my passions, and giving me space to grow as an advocate and human.

I encourage you to check out Equal Justice America and contribute to their mission of making public internships financially accessible to all law students.