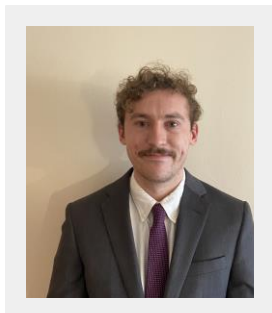




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Manhattan Legal Services

Update 1: I am excited to share that this summer I am working in the Housing Rights Unit of Manhattan Legal Services. As an intern, I am working with a team of attorneys fighting to build tenant power through organizing and affirmative litigation. Additionally, we work to defend tenants in eviction cases.

Through my internship, I am beginning to see just how important legal services are. In housing work, legal aid providers represent our communities' poorest members against exploitative and often very wealthy landlords. Without our free legal services, tenants often do not have the resources or expertise needed to navigate Housing Court. As a result, these tenants are unable to get much needed repairs for their apartments or to defend themselves from unwarranted evictions. This leads to many either living in unhealthy conditions or being forced out of their rent-stabilized or rent-controlled housing.

Notably, New Yorkers only won the right to counsel in Housing Court in 2017. As a result, Housing Rights attorneys are largely working in a new space that had previously been dominated by landlords and still seems to lean in their favor. To learn more about housing law, the right to counsel, and the movement to build tenant power, feel free to watch this documentary on how organizers and tenant-rights activists got right-to-counsel legislation passed in 2017: https://www.righttocounselnyc.org/rtc_documentary.

Lastly, I am receiving financial support for my internship from Equal Justice America who gives grants to law students interning in public interest positions. In choosing to work in legal services, many law students are turning down the opportunity to make tens of thousands of dollars over the summer by working for a firm so that they can instead work to help others. Equal Justice America is a nonprofit that helps to support these students by giving them stipends for what are often unpaid internships. To support legal aid and public interest law students, consider donating to Equal Justice America to help them fund more public interest internships like mine!

Update 2: I am five weeks into my internship with LSNYC working in the Housing Rights Unit. So far, it has been an amazing experience and I have learned so much about what it is like to be an attorney.



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Legal Services has been the exact kind of experience I hoped it would be, providing many opportunities for client contact, legal research, and non-legal advocacy. I have drafted demand letters to landlords and advocacy letters to city agencies. I have made an appearance in court while shadowing my supervisor. I have both shadowed and conducted calls with clients. I have researched legal issues and have had my findings considered when giving advice to clients.

While I have always seen myself as preferring research over client contact, the internship has helped me to be more comfortable and better able to work with clients. Further, it is infinitely more rewarding to conduct research when you know that your findings have real stakes in people's lives.

In addition to the various kinds of work, I am excited to have been able to help clients on such a variety of issues. My supervisors and I have worked to help tenants succeed to their parents rent-stabilized apartments, to help force landlords to make repairs in apartments, to recover money from rent-overcharges, and to defend clients from unlawful evictions.

However, I have also learned that there is still a lot of work to be done. Even when the laws give tenants' rights or outlaw certain behaviors on the part of the landlord, there are not always sufficient legal remedies to resolve the cases and tenants often do not have the resources to fight back.

Update 3: One of my favorite parts of my internship with @Legal Services NYC has been getting to see movement lawyering in action. While I had read about movement lawyering in law school, it gives the concept meaning to see it practiced in the real world.

For those who do not know, movement lawyering is an approach to legal advocacy which tries to empower the communities being served and to help them achieve their goals, both legal and non-legal. This approach stands in contrast to traditional modes of lawyering in which attorneys wield most of the power and tell their clients what they can and cannot, or should and should not, do. As a result, movement lawyering requires taking an active step back to allow space for clients to take on the lead, to organize, and to articulate their needs and goals. It requires lawyers to do more listening than leading, to inform their clients on the law so that they can be empowered to make their own decisions rather than to tell them what they should or should not do.

The Tenant's Right Coalition group that I work with at Manhattan Legal Services is dedicated to this form of empowerment. The Tenant's Right Coalition seeks to build tenant power and to aid them in affirmative cases such as seeking repairs, ending landlord harassment, or recovering rent overcharges. Rather than lead the way, the attorneys on this project seek to build client power by working with organizers to help tenants come together and fight towards a common objective. Further, they seek to have tenants to take charge and to help organize and discuss goals and strategies with other tenants. As attorneys, they hope to take on a supporting role where they explain the legal implications of different forms of advocacy rather than trying to tell the tenants what path to take.

As a result of this experience, I have seen what it actually looks like to empower tenants. Regardless of the work I go into in the future, my hope is to take the values of movement lawyering with me by seeking to empower my clients and to ensure that I listen to and support their goals.



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Update 4: Last week, I had to go to Part F, where housing court is located, in order to scan a file. While I was there scanning documents, I witnessed a man who had to defend himself against eviction attempt to make his initial answer without an attorney to represent him. The man had applied for an attorney but was denied.

When asked what his legal defenses were to eviction, the man clearly did not know what to say. He listed several reasons, such as his connections to the neighborhood and his desire not to have to move. Growingly frustrated, the person from the court asking him these questions tried to explain to him that these were not legal arguments. His response summed up the message of this story: “This is why I need an attorney!”

Without representation, it is almost impossible to defend oneself in a legal proceeding. Most people do not have a legal education which would allow them to parse through case law or statutes, let alone subscriptions to Westlaw or Lexis in order to easily find these documents. Even those with a legal education would likely find it difficult to defend themselves in an area of law outside their area of expertise against lawyers who specialize in that specific field.

This trip to the courthouse really opened my eyes to the importance of providing free legal representation to those who would not otherwise have access. While Right to Counsel helped to expand this representation to many New Yorkers facing eviction, it is still limited in its reach. Only households within 200% of the poverty line are eligible for a free attorney. For a single household, that is only \$26,000 a year. As a result, many who cannot afford an attorney still do not qualify for free representation, drastically reducing their odds of making a successful defense against an eviction proceeding.

Right to Counsel was a good step, but it is simply not enough on its own. We must do more to expand representation for all who need it.

Update 5: A couple of weeks ago, I finished my internship with Manhattan Legal Services’ Housing Rights Unit. I am so thankful for the ten weeks I had at that organization and for my supervisors who worked hard to make sure it was a formative experience. Additionally, I am thankful for the extra financial support provided to me by Equal Justice America. It is hard to afford living in New York, and their money allowed me to be more focused on the clients I was serving rather than being concerned with how I would afford rent.

I learned so much from my first legal internship. There is something very different about real-world legal work compared to conducting simulated work in a classroom. Real client contact and research and writing assignments showed me what being an attorney is actually like in addition to providing me with more experience in each area. Additionally, I got to see movement lawyering in action. Seeing attorneys stress the importance of the clients’ goals and seeking to empower them rather than to dominate strategy sessions really left a strong impact on me, demonstrating how to put the ideals of movement lawyering into practice. Further, I was very happy that I had the opportunity to shadow my supervisor in person while she conducted a court appearance. The experience was very informative as I saw how conversational court can be in addition to the way a real judge asks questions to try to resolve a dispute. Overall, it made me much more comfortable with the idea of becoming a litigator, just as my internship overall made me much more confident in my abilities to be an effective legal advocate.



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Beyond learning about lawyering, my experience in housing work also taught me a lot about the world of legal services. It became very clear to me that everyone needs an attorney. The procedural and substantive aspects of legal disputes is too much for anyone to handle on their own, let alone those with jobs, children, and other responsibilities to be concerned with. Additionally, I came to understand direct services and system-level impact as more intertwined than most believe them to be. Most specifically, right to counsel is a system-level impact which greatly changed the balance of power between poor tenants and their landlords by giving tenants a right to an attorney. However, the instantiation of this system-level change requires attorneys to provide direct services to individual tenants. As such, the system-level impact could not occur without the attorneys providing direct services. Seeing direct services and system-level impact as intertwined, I feel that we can seek to reinforce the importance of direct services against the critiques that it does nothing to change the system by showing that direct services and system-level change depend on each other to be effective rather than being opposed.