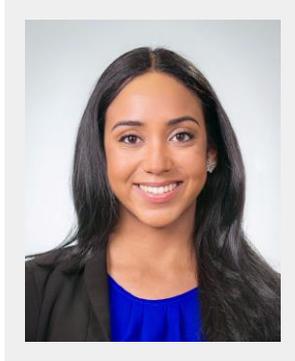




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Thalia Guzman

**Law School:** Boston University School of Law

**Organization:** Greater Boston Legal Services

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**Update 1:** The first couple of weeks of the internship we had the opportunity to learn more about the organization's mission, structure, and history. Notably, we had the opportunity to hear from each of the organization's units. I was pleased to see how holistic the support is and how much the units could overlap in their work. It is clear that the organization understands how issues faced by people with low incomes may intersect and amplify one another. The work of the family unit – and specifically the Domestic Violence Workgroup where I am placed – can often overlap with the immigration unit, the welfare unit, and the consumer rights unit. A large proportion of our clients are immigrant women who may also need support in their immigration matters, qualify for and require assistance in accessing government assistance programs, or face financial abuse by their partners. We also had the opportunity to engage in some substantive training regarding family law and some specialized training regarding our work with individuals who have faced domestic violence. We also sat in on a short hearing where a divorce had been finalized. Overall, I enjoyed receiving a thorough and in-depth introduction to the organization and orientation regarding the work we were to engage in. I look forward to beginning my work on cases in the coming weeks.

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**Update 2:** Over the last couple of weeks, I have had the opportunity to observe hearings at various Probate and Family Courts. It has been incredibly interesting to not only observe GBLS attorneys but also have a chance to gain greater exposure to the range of matters that appear before judges at the Probate and Family court as hearings are open to the public. I have seen that family law is an incredibly personal field of law with many different stories and circumstances. Individuals seeking legal assistance in this field come from all walks of life with many different backgrounds. At the end of the day, the priority is the well-being of the child. I was also surprised to see how much is handled outside of the courtroom and outside of a trial. I think going in (likely partly due to the media) I expected much more extensive and involved interactions before the judge. However, the hearings have for the most part been focused and brief, and judges have responded favorably to parties settling issues prior to their appearance. Another surprising fact related to this is that probation officers at Probate and Family Court serve as mediators to facilitate settling matters independently with the goal that only truly contested issues appear before the judge. It's an interesting testament to judicial efficiency which we discussed extensively in coursework. I look forward to gaining more exposure to the legal writing that is integral in family law and gaining a clearer understanding of relevant procedural matters.



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**Update 3:** One of the highlights of my time at GBLS has been getting to know our clients and building a relationship with them. I've had the opportunity to speak with many clients and develop skills in trauma-informed client counseling and interviewing. The clients I've worked with are turning to us for support through very difficult situations and entrusting us with a lot of personal information that can be tough to speak about. Our supervisor has been very helpful in offering us tips and guidance for being effective and compassionate listeners while still gathering the information that is required to assess the facts of the case. Some of the tips she offered were ensuring that we hold space for clients' emotions and offer them validation by expressing that they are indeed going through a difficult time. She also suggested that while we should make sure that we collect the information we need to assess the issues of the case, we should steer the conversation gently and slowly as clients are often using the opportunity in speaking to openly express themselves and be heard. In addition, it has been important to actively listen and know when to ask follow-up questions to make sure we are fully capturing our client's needs. It has been the case that we've found that clients need additional support with other legal matters such as taxes, immigration, and housing.

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**Update 4:** Recently, we had the opportunity to assist at the Probate and Family Court Service Center. Court Service Centers offer court documents and written instructions, one-on-one help filling out forms, information about court rules, procedures, and practices, and information for community resources, legal assistance programs, and social service agencies. I found it to be a great resource for individuals who are involved in court proceedings without legal representation or may want to address an issue in court but don't know where to begin or what remedies are available to them. During my time there I had the opportunity to prepare a divorce complaint in its entirety and a motion for child support. In just a couple of hours, the individual had everything she needed to file the complaint that same day. GBLS' involvement with the Court Service Center is also really great because the organization may sometimes come across individuals that may need more extensive support and may qualify for the organization's services. There was one such case during my time there that was later discussed in our unit meeting. Overall, it was interesting to see another way in which legal aid organizations can extend their reach in the community.

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**Update 5:** In reflecting back on my time at Greater Boston Legal Services, I am grateful for the opportunity I had to work so closely with clients and with numerous attorneys. As someone who has always had an interest in family law, my time with GBLS more than exceeded my expectations. Not only did I learn extensively about substantive matters, but I also witnessed what it is like to be a dedicated advocate that considers the holistic needs of clients. The attorneys at GBLS are collaborative, knowledgeable, and willing to go above and beyond. I am also grateful for the opportunity I had to connect more closely with the Greater Boston community and gain a greater understanding of the many immigrant communities of which it is made up. I had a chance to visit Chelsea and Waltham where many of our clients reside and witness the impact that legal aid organizations like GBLS have in these communities. Many of the attorneys at GBLS have developed long-standing relationships with local community leaders, business owners, and residents. It was really special to witness. Overall, I could not have asked for a better summer. I thank Equal Justice America for supporting me in this wonderful learning experience. While I hope to be able to continue my relationship with GBLS for the rest of my law school career and beyond, the knowledge and skills I acquired this summer will surely make me a more effective and compassionate attorney wherever my career may take me.