



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Legal Aid Society

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**Update 1:** The funding I received through Equal Justice America will support my work at the Legal Aid Society's Bronx Housing Group Advocacy Unit this summer.

This unit plays a unique role in New York City's tenants' rights landscape. While eviction defense attorneys protect low income tenants' access to their homes, the Group Advocacy unit focuses on making sure these premises are safe and habitable. Attorneys and paralegal-case handlers help tenants organize and work with their neighbors to file affirmative suits against exploitative landlords. The unit selects cases by responding to individual tenant complaints regarding building's conditions or news coverage of large-scale housing catastrophes, such as building fires, etc. For instance, this week, several buildings owned by one Bronx landlord had severe fires. The Housing Group Advocacy unit at Legal Aid helps displaced tenants in such situations secure replacement housing, receive compensation and hopefully return to repaired homes.

I look forward to learning how I can use my legal skills to enhance tenant power, and fight against housing deprivation at my internship this summer.

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**Update 2:** This week, I had the opportunity to learn about movement lawyering during one of the trainings Legal Aid offers to interns in the civil practice. During this session, we heard about the coalitions through which Legal Aid, along with other organizations and community members, fight to advance systemic reforms that would address NYC's housing crisis. Recently, a coalition of housing advocates mobilized to advance the Good Cause Eviction bill which aimed to prevent landlords from arbitrarily ending tenancies. While Good Cause did not pass in this session, the movement inspired by this legislation will continue to fight and try again next year.

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**Update 3:** Last week, I had the opportunity to speak with a group of tenants who were seeking Legal Aid's assistance in order to take affirmative action against their exploitative landlord. This tenant community was



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

incredibly inspiring, and modeled an example of community-based care and activism, that I hope to replicate in my own life. Each of the tenants talked about their building and their neighbors with incredible love and care. These neighbors supported each other, raised their children together and are now looking after vulnerable members of their community, especially when officials responsible for this task fail to do so. For example, one woman noted that her neighbors in the building babysat her when she was young and were now helping her care for her elderly mother. Even the supers in this building would check in on vulnerable and elderly tenants who didn't have family around. The caring and tight knit nature of this community, caused this tenant group to be incredibly powerful, and effective advocates. Since these neighbors were incredibly invested in each other's well being, they were willing to fight against changes or injustices that impacted the most vulnerable members of their community. For instance, many financially well-off tenants were willing to take affirmative steps to prevent a rent increase that would impact folks on a fixed income. The cohesive and caring nature of this tenant group caused them to successfully challenge their landlords, and secure some tenant protections, in the past. I am incredibly excited to be able to witness their advocacy strategies and help provide them with any legal support they need, through my internship at the Legal Aid Housing Group Advocacy Unit.

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**Update 4:** This week, I had the opportunity to participate in a trial training program Legal Aid runs for attorneys in their civil practice. Along with other interns, I prepared to play a witness in this mock trial. Training for this experience allowed me to grapple more fully with the impact that race and class play in our courts, and "justice" system. The attorneys running the training spoke frankly about how adopting western manners, dress and ways of speaking, could impact how a judge reacted to the testimony at hand. The attorneys highlighted the racist and classist implications of such a reality, as many marginalized communities have norms around eye contact, dress and colloquial language that may not be viewed favorably by members of the New York City judicial system. Many amazing advocates, including some folks at Legal Aid, are trying to change this reality, through informal conversations and judicial training. However, presently, marginalized people continue to be forced to accommodate racist and classist assumptions in order to obtain the justice they deserve.

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**Update 5:** This summer my internship at the Legal Aid Society's group advocacy unit helped me come to a series of realizations with regards to direct services lawyering. For one, my work helped me fully appreciate the power of direct legal services. However, interestingly, I was able to come to this realization, by first understanding the limits of lawyering, and the power of other advocacy forms, such as organizing. At the group advocacy unit, attorneys help groups of tenants, and tenant unions, file affirmative cases against their landlord. Legally, affirmative cases can be challenging, as it is hard to get a Court to order corrections of violations, and judges are sometimes unlikely to actually enforce Orders to Correct by finding contempt and imposing sanctions. However, the efficacy of an affirmative case increases with its size, as courts are more likely to comprehend the seriousness of violations if they are highlighted by multiple tenants. In fact, tenant organizing is not only an important first step to an effective case but can also in many cases present an efficacious alternative. Groups of tenants and neighbors often successfully force their landlord, through non legal means such as open letters, etc, to correct violations and ensure healthy living conditions for all involved. I spoke to many Tenants



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Unions who had a wide breadth of knowledge on their legal rights, and incredible amounts of experience fighting for them, even in the absence of attorneys.

As I appreciated the limits of court orders and the efficacy of organizing, I began to reflect on the role/importance of lawyering under these conditions. As the summer went on, I started to understand another dimension of the work completed by lawyers in the group advocacy unit, which emphasized the importance of this job. Instead of just reflecting on how organizing could impact/enhance the efficacy of lawyering, I began to realize that lawyering was a key way to facilitate tenant organizing, and increase its impact. While every building I worked on had tenant leaders who were great organizers, these leaders also often expressed challenges with this labor. These leaders, along with some tenants in their building, often faced economic burdens and other challenges that limited the time and resources available to do organizing work. Therefore, attorneys I worked with helped facilitate tenant organizing by printing out flyers, organizing tenant meetings, and taking away some of the administrative burdens placed on tenants trying to come together to improve building conditions. The attorneys were also able to use their experience to discuss the various advocacy strategies tenant groups could pursue, if the building did not already have an active tenant union, and were therefore unaware of such potential strategies. The lawyers were not only able to describe advocacy options, but also expand the options available to tenants by providing free legal services. While many tenant groups do not have the time or energy to pursue a housing court case for 1 year, or file a long DHCR complaint, the attorneys did have the resources to pursue these avenues. Therefore, viewing lawyering as part of a larger organizing effort, allowed me to see the true potential of this work, and reaffirmed my interest in pursuing a career in housing law.