



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Update 1:** Starting work at GCLC was intimidating at first. Like many of the clients, I was tasked with making my way through complicated forms with various rules and exceptions for the first time. However, that has turned into one of the best parts of the experience so far because it has shown me how much I have learned over the last two weeks about the process of petitioning for various visas. So when another young couple came into our office at the end of last week, I felt confident in my ability to answer many of their questions and help them sort through the paperwork we threw at them. When working with clients, I can still relate to how intimidating these processes are but am looking forward to learning even more as we tackle the United States immigration system together.

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**Update 2:** One of the things I have come to learn about immigration law is that it is a flurry of activity and then waiting to complete the next step. This past week, I finally completed and submitted my first finalized application for a client. She first came in my second week at GCLC to renew her DACA. When I met with her, the attorney and I went over the initial paperwork we would submit and then I compiled a list of remaining documents that she needed to bring in to support her application. That day, I was in a flurry finalizing forms and sending a final list to the client. Then, it was waiting for a week for her to come back in with the final documentation. Once she came in, I was once again running around the office making copies and finalizing paperwork for the client. Once I mailed the application, however, it was another week of waiting to hear back from the government to make sure they had the application. After all the starts and stops, it was nice being able to call the client and let her know that her application was finally being processed. It also felt like an accomplishment to finally complete an application while in a holding pattern with some of the other clients I am working with.

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**Update 3:** This past week I had my first case fall apart and my first case complete the approval process with USCIS. I heard back from clients who were applying for a green card that they needed to hold the application



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because they were experiencing marital issues. Not only was this sad as I had met with this couple since my first week on the job, but it was sad to know how this put everything up in the air for the two of them. I can get frustrated when things don't go smoothly or when I can't complete a task--but this was a good reminder that I am working with people with lives outside their immigration applications. On the other hand, I got to share great news that one of the DACA renewal applications I had submitted for a client received final approval. There has been nothing more satisfying in this job than getting to complete a task for a client and seeing it work out as it should.

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**Update 4:** This past week I had a long conversation with my supervising attorney about the importance of not getting disillusioned, particularly working in the immigration space. We have had multiple clients either cancel or not show up for appointments recently, which unfortunately is not a particularly rare occurrence. It is hard not to understand why. Sometimes, the immigration system feels like it puts up never ending roadblocks, even for practiced attorneys, when it can be difficult to find answers to simple questions such as finding the correct address to send an asylum application. For many of our clients, the roadblocks do not just include legal or administrative hangups. There are significant costs associated with covering legal fees as well as steep USCIS filing fees. Moreover, many clients have to drive in from outside of the city--taking hours of their day--to meet with us or to attend hearings. For many, this eats into a significant chunk of their workday and is why many of them decide to put off filing for certain visas even when they qualify. Finally, legal aids have only so much capacity to take on cases and we are not able to help everyone who comes to us. Seeing all of these factors play a role in blocking clients from pursuing their immigration applications turns many people into pessimists. As someone who likes to think of herself as an optimist, there have been days where I have shared in that pessimistic attitude. However, as my supervising attorney reminded me, it is important to help those we can to navigate these complicated systems. To me, that has become the purpose of all of this work: To be available to help those we can because these systems are not going to change overnight.

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**Update 5:** Reflecting on this summer, I had two major takeaways. First, providing access to legal services requires creativity on behalf of legal aid organizations and attorneys. One of the ways the clinic was working to provide representation to more clients was implementing limited scope representation for certain asylum seekers. With the influx of immigrants being moved from Texas to cities like Chicago, there are many people who are seeking legal representation for their asylum claims—often from Venezuela. The attorneys at GCLC asked the interns to compile the necessary documents to be able to represent clients in filing their initial asylum application without committing to representing each and every one of them in court. This would allow these individuals to file withing the one-year deadline to make their claim for asylum and would give them time to seek full-time counsel since asylum hearings usually take place three to seven years after the initial application is filed. Luckily, we were able to take on one full-time asylum case while I was working at the clinic. After meeting with the client, the attorney asked me to begin conducting the country-specific research necessary to support the client's claim. It became clear to me how heavy of a lift asylum cases are in order to provide adequate



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representation to a single client. By helping clients file their initial applications, the clinic was able to buy them time in order to find counsel who can give their cases the labor they deserve.

Second, the law is a client-centric industry. By far the most rewarding—and the most fun—part of my summer was getting to work directly with clients. Sometimes this meant sitting with young newlyweds who were preparing a family-based immigration petition or getting to call clients and inform them that their DACA renewal had been improved ahead of schedule. Other times, interactions were less joyful and meant sitting with clients as the attorneys explained to them the bars preventing them from obtaining legal status or listening as a client shared their story as to why they are seeking temporary protected status or asylum. Sitting in a law school classroom, it is easy to forget that the practice of the law is not purely an academic discipline and that we are preparing for careers in a client-centric industry. This was my primary takeaway from this summer that I know I will carry with me long into my career. A lot of my time this summer was spent troubleshooting with the attorneys to find the best path forward for the clients. This always meant keeping the client's best interests at the center of these discussions even if there were potentially more exciting and intellectually stimulating solutions to their legal problems. Particularly in the immigration space, this meant calculating the potential risks for the client compared to the potential benefits of certain paths forward. However, I think this lesson can be brought into any practice.