



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Elizabeth Dia

**Law School:** New York University

**Organization:** Rights Behind Bars

---

**Update 1:** I am so excited to be interning at Rights Behind Bars this summer. My internship is funded in part by Equal Justice America, and I'll be sharing periodic updates as part of my fellowship.

Rights Behind Bars (RBB) describes itself as “a non-profit legal advocacy organization working alongside incarcerated people to challenge the cruel and inhumane conditions of confinement.” RBB does both affirmative litigation and appellate advocacy. Information about RBB’s work and the clients they represent can be found on their website: <https://lnkd.in/e3qXQ4Wq>.

The team at RBB has been so welcoming and I am excited to learn from such amazing, intelligent advocates this summer.

So far this summer, I have had the opportunity to learn more about laws protecting people with disabilities and how those laws can be used to help incarcerated people with disabilities. The majority of individuals incarcerated in prison or jail have at least one disability, yet jails and prisons across the country do not adequately address their needs.

I have also had the opportunity to participate in client intake calls. I am excited to learn more about prison law this summer and how lawyers can support on the ground movements challenging mass incarceration.

---

**Update 2:** In the last two weeks, I’ve learned more about disability discrimination in jails and prisons. For example, many jails and prisons have work programs that allow individuals to work days off their sentence. However, many of these work programs simply exclude people who are unable to work due to their disabilities. As a result, these individuals must serve their full sentence. Analogously, many prisons allow prisoners to be released early in work release programs but exclude people with disabilities who are unable to work.



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

People who have mental disabilities are also put into solitary confinement, which exacerbates symptoms of mental illness and can lead to increased risk of suicide.

So far this summer, I have worked on legal research related to disability rights and have had the opportunity to participate in intake calls. I am impressed by the bravery of directly impacted people who share their stories and advocate for change.

---

**Update 3:** Since my last update, I've been working on various assignments involving legal research and writing. I have had the opportunity to research laws that protect the civil rights of individuals in immigration detention. Much of my work before this summer has focused on immigrant rights, and I'm glad to have this opportunity to expand my knowledge of how lawyers can work to help immigrant communities. Understanding the intersections between the criminal legal system, incarceration, and immigration enforcement is incredibly vital.

Individuals in prisons and immigration detention face many similar challenges, including horrific conditions of confinement and inadequate medical and mental health care. Many individuals experience incarceration in both types of facilities, as well.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to improve my research skills and my ability to make creative legal arguments on behalf of our clients.

To read more about RBB's work challenging immigration detention, you can see information about their cases here: <https://lnkd.in/eBcH7dXQ>.

---

**Update 4:** These past few weeks, I have focused on legal research and writing assignments related to RBB's affirmative litigation docket.

This experience has helped me better understand the value litigation can bring to movement lawyering.

RBB describes its approach as a movement lawyering framework, writing: "This means that litigation is just one tool, among many, that we use to achieve the goals of the clients and movements we serve. We pair innovative trial litigation with public advocacy, education, media and organizing strategies to ensure that our work has a broader and more sustainable scope than what would be achievable through litigation alone."

Many incarcerated individuals are unable to access legal representation and it would be impossible for one organization to serve all the legal needs of incarcerated people.

Knowing that RBB's work helps individual clients, as well as broader communities and movement goals, is



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

incredibly meaningful.

I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to learn more about movement-led lawyering this summer.

---

**Update 5:** I am so thankful that I had the opportunity to intern at Rights Behind Bars this summer.

I learned from amazing advocates who work alongside their clients with creativity, strength, and kindness. I am so appreciative of the warm welcome and the mentorship I received throughout the summer.

Over the course of the summer, I became a better legal researcher and writer. I had the opportunity to research areas of the law that I was previously unfamiliar with and write lots of memos. Knowing that the legal research I completed will help the RBB team better represent clients is incredibly meaningful. The work RBB is doing makes concrete improvements in the lives of clients, while also raising awareness about both the harms of incarceration and the important work being done by movement leaders.

I also spoke on the phone with clients and I'm so grateful for their bravery in sharing their experiences and advocating for themselves and their communities. It is incredibly difficult to speak about traumatizing experiences and many clients fear retaliation. The leadership and expertise of jailhouse lawyers and other incarcerated people is incredibly important. I appreciated working at an organization that prioritized the expertise of those with lived experiences related to incarceration and detention.

This summer, I learned more about the rights of incarcerated people, disability rights, racial justice, immigrant rights, and the rights of survivors of sexual violence. Interning at RBB was a reminder that, even though these topic areas may be studied separately in law school, they frequently overlap in our clients' lived experiences. During my internship, I witnessed that firsthand.

The end of my internship was bittersweet. I am excited to start my final year of law school, but I will miss the team and the work at RBB.

I am excited to use the skills I learned at RBB to serve similar communities in the future. Working at RBB reaffirmed my commitment to public interest work and movement lawyering.