



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: New York Legal Assistance Group

Update 1: I am excited to say that I have received an Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship for the second time! This time, I am spending my summer interning at New York Legal Assistance Group in their Public Benefits Unit, specifically with the Public Assistance/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ("SNAP," formerly known as "Food Stamps) Practice and Shelter Advocacy Initiative.

The Shelter Advocacy Initiative provides legal representation to people experiencing homelessness, both to those currently residing in homeless shelters as well as to those experiencing "street homelessness," meaning they are sleeping in public places throughout the city. We work on behalf of single adults and families to assist them with obtaining habitable emergency shelter and housing subsidies, which allows our clients to transition to permanent housing and continue working toward financial stability and empowerment.

Just like last year, New York University School of Law provides me with some guaranteed summer funding--this time, \$7500. My \$1000 award from Equal Justice America helps me to close the gap between my NYU funding and my expenses, but most law students throughout the country do not have the same access to guaranteed summer funding for public interest internships.

Unpaid summer public interest internships serve to perpetuate inequity of access to pursuing public interest careers, and that inequity trickles down (or up) into who is hired for public interest jobs, selected for public interest promotions, and able to lead public interest organizations as executive staff. Equal Justice America helps to make this profession more accessible to those of us just starting out our careers.

Consider donating to Equal Justice America so that they can continue providing summer funding to public interest students like me, and especially to those without guaranteed summer public interest funding.



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Update 2: This time, I want to write a little about CityFHEPS, an NYC housing subsidy available to people who are currently residing in or are at risk of reentry into the homeless shelter system. Recipients of CityFHEPS must be at or below 200% of the federal poverty line, which is \$29,160 for a single-person household and \$60,000 for a household of four.

Recently, City Council passed a series of housing voucher bills that would have made it easier to obtain and use CityFHEPS, accelerating New Yorkers' exits from the shelter system and into stable, private housing. One bill would remove the "shelter stay" requirement, thereby allowing people to obtain the subsidy without burdening the city's shelter system. According to data for the first four months of Fiscal Year 2023 in the most recent Preliminary Mayor's Management Report, the average length of stay in shelter was 802 days for adult families, 485 days for families with children, and 441 days for single adults. The Mayor's Housing Blueprint estimates that it cost the city nearly \$8,773 per month to house a family of two in the shelter system in 2022. A CityFHEPS voucher for the same family would cost a maximum of \$2,387, and likely less, resulting in a lower total annual expense.

Despite City Council passing these bills by an overwhelming margin of 41-7, Mayor Adams vetoed the package in early June. Since then, the Council has announced that they intend to override Mayor Adams' veto, meaning poor New Yorkers may actually see these reforms become reality.

It is nearly impossible to leave the shelter system and obtain a private apartment without the help of a program like CityFHEPS, in large part because of the up-front moving costs that CityFHEPS covers. CityFHEPS pays for recipients' deposits, first month's rents, and up to 15% of broker's fees. Think about how much it cost you to move into your current apartment, and then consider how you could have ever covered those expenses on your own *while experiencing homelessness.*

This summer at New York Legal Assistance Group, I have had the opportunity to help my clients navigate the nightmarish bureaucracy that is the CityFHEPS program. I have seen clients lose out on apartments because the City failed to process their CityFHEPS benefits before a private landlord got fed up and rented an apartment to somebody else. We should be making CityFHEPS easier to use, not maintaining its clear inadequacy

Update 3: My third EJA Fellow Update comes quick on the heels of the last one, because yesterday the New York City Council overrode Mayor Adams' vetoes of all three CityFHEPS reform bills! I had the incredible opportunity to be in the Council Chambers when the Committee on General Welfare voted unanimously to advance the veto override vote to the greater Council. I spent much of my time this week working on New York Legal Assistance Group's testimony for this hearing, highlighting our own clients' experiences of stumbling through inefficient, problematic, and demeaning CityFHEPS processes. These bills will make it easier for low-income New Yorkers to avoid homelessness in the first place, creating stronger communities and a stronger city overall.



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I am so glad to have the support of Equal Justice America this summer, so that I can take what I have learned at New York University School of Law and put it to good use supporting my communities.

Update 4: I've written before about New York Legal Assistance Group's Shelter Advocacy Initiative, a project within the Public Assistance and SNAP Practice that serves people experiencing homelessness, both those within shelters and those living outside. We partner with City Relief, a mobile outreach nonprofit that offers people experiencing poverty and homelessness hot meals, supplies, and connections to resources. Throughout the summer, I have had the opportunity to table at City Relief outreach events and meet with clients experiencing a range of issues, from not understanding how to use the direct deposit card that their Social Security is deposited onto, to how to navigate the housing voucher system, to wrongful termination of their public benefits.

One of the services we offer is connection to Safe Haven shelter placements and stabilization beds, which are small-scale, lower-barrier programs specifically tailored for individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness who are not best served by the city's standard congregate care shelter system. Safe Havens provide specialized beds and program characteristics specifically meant to address individuals' unique needs. With the understanding that oftentimes the only way to obtain stable housing is by first entering the shelter system, and by understanding that the shelter system can be dangerous and traumatic for those who must enter it, Safe Haven and stabilization beds provide a solution as opposed to condemning people to street homelessness when the standard shelter system fails to meet their needs.

I have been lucky enough to do this work with the support of both New York University School of Law and Equal Justice America, a nonprofit organization that provides summer funding for students doing public interest internships throughout the country. This work is often unpaid and always underpaid, and Equal Justice America helps to make the public interest profession more equitable and representative of the students dedicated to this work.

Update 5: I finished up my incredible summer with New York Legal Assistance Group a week and a half ago. I had the opportunity to work directly with clients, some housed, some living in homeless shelters, and some living outside on public streets. While helping those clients to navigate the impossibly complicated public benefits and New York City homeless shelter systems, I was also able to work on challenging city and state policies that disadvantaged or ignored the needs of poor and unhoused New Yorkers. I watched the New York City Council override Mayor Adams' veto of critically necessary housing subsidy reforms. I conducted outreach in city parks to reach people experiencing street homelessness and with community partners like Safe Horizon, to meet unhoused young queer people in need of legal services where they were most comfortable. Being poor is a full-time job. Being homeless is a second full-time job on top of that.

The thing I most valued from my summer work was having the chance to collaborate with other organizations doing similar work, including the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, Empire Justice Center, Legal Services NYC, and the Legal Aid Society. There is power in numbers, and it is inspiring to see how hard people



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have been working at making New York work better for its most vulnerable community members. I was lucky to work alongside them and to learn a little from them during my short stint as a summer legal intern.

I am thankful to Equal Justice America for supplementing New York University School of Law's summer funding grant for public interest work. It can be especially difficult for law students to take unpaid public interest internships during their 2L (second year) summer, since corporate firms pay their summer associates upwards of \$30k for the same 9-week stretch of work. It is not easy to give up that kind of financial opportunity, and it is even harder if the alternative financial option fails to provide even a livable wage in a place like New York City.

To help try to bridge the gap between paid corporate work and unpaid public interest work, consider donating to Equal Justice America so that public interest students like me can continue to pursue this work.