



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Abby Popenoe

**Law School:** UC Davis School of Law

**Organization:** Root & Rebound

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**Update 1:** I am deeply grateful to be receiving a fellowship from Equal Justice America to fund my summer work doing reentry advocacy at Root & Rebound.

Root & Rebound's clients are people who are trying to have a new start at a better life after being formerly incarcerated, having a conviction history, or otherwise being affected by our criminal punishment system. The barriers to reentering the outside world after incarceration are immense—from access to housing, to employment barriers, to records that follow people around for decades, our society makes it nearly impossible for people to have a second chance at life.

I am excited to spend the summer listening to and advocating on behalf of Root & Rebound's clients, so that I can push back against the harmful system of mass incarceration and help bring healing to individuals and communities.

Equal Justice America funds law students doing legal aid work across the country. Far too many people lack the legal power to fight injustice against them because they cannot afford a lawyer. Equal Justice America's funding is a critical step in ensuring that everyone can access the legal services they need to live a dignified and thriving life.

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**Update 2:** Last week I had the opportunity to travel to the North Coast of California to run legal clinics as part of my Equal Justice America fellowship with Root & Rebound. We ran four clinics over three days, focusing on providing know your rights information and legal services to Tribal and low-income communities.

By showing up in the community centers and social services offices of towns where our clients live, we were able to lower the significant barriers low-income individuals in rural communities face when trying to access legal



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services. Our clinics included presentations on the rights of people with arrest and conviction histories when seeking a job, surviving parole or probation, or attempting to clear their criminal records. We also conducted individual legal intakes for clients facing a range of reentry-related issues and provided free fingerprinting so clients could get started on expunging their records.

This clinic trip was meaningful and rewarding on many levels. It showed me that bringing legal power to underserved communities entails more than just making services available—sometimes it requires taking a road trip and showing up right where your clients are at. The immense positive impact of this type of direct legal aid shows why Equal Justice America’s funding is critical to reducing barriers to legal assistance.

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**Update 3:** One of my main areas of focus in my Equal Justice America fellowship at Root & Rebound has been helping people with conviction histories clean up their records. Through this work I have had the opportunity to listen to clients tell the stories of how they have changed their lives since their convictions, and the stories of how they still face daily prejudice based on the actions of their pasts.

For so many formerly incarcerated people, record cleaning is the critical first step to being able to access housing and jobs that pay a livable wage. Yet many other clients come to Root & Rebound when they are not facing any immediate barrier. Instead, these clients seek the monumental impact record cleaning can have on a person’s dignity.

By helping my clients clean their records, I show them that every human is deserving of the compassion, respect, and opportunity for personal change that people impacted by incarceration are so often denied. And when the court grants a petition, many clients experience this dismissal of their conviction as external confirmation that they are a worthy member of society. Record cleaning may help a client attain housing or a job, or it may not. Either way, it has the power to bring them a new sense of self and belonging in society.

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**Update 4:** Over the past few weeks I have been working closely with four clients who are struggling to pay off debt from fines and fees associated with their criminal cases and incarceration. These clients are working hard to get their lives back on track after convictions—trying to recover from addiction, care for their children, and maintain consistent work. However, instead of being able to focus on these goals, my clients are forced to put their limited resources into paying off mountains of court ordered debt.

I have been able to help these clients learn how much they owe, set up payment plans, and attempt to get their fees reduced. But these are band aids, not solutions. Even with payment plans and reductions, my clients may be paying off this debt for the rest of their lives. Instead of serving their sentences and moving on, these individuals will always have the financial shadow of their convictions following them.



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Despite this, my clients have expressed deep gratitude for any small amount of help in paying off their debt. Working with these clients has shown me that while full justice requires system-wide change, there is much legal aid can do today to ease my clients' burdens.

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**Update 5:** With my Equal Justice America fellowship at Root & Rebound having come to a close, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the deep learning I experienced this summer. The clients I worked with at Root & Rebound showed me that the collateral harms caused by mass incarceration run deeper than I can ever fully understand, and that addressing these harms requires compassion, curiosity, and patience.

The barriers to reentering society after incarceration that my clients faced rarely fit into neat boxes. Throughout my internship, I answered calls from clients asking for simple expungement of their criminal records. Yet more often than not, a short conversation with a new client would reveal that their challenges ran far deeper than a need for record cleaning. Hardships with housing, employment, family, and health were all tied together by the stigma and legal consequences of a conviction.

My summer at Root & Rebound also showed me the intricacies of addressing barriers to reentry and provided a new understanding of how to measure success in legal aid.

Because the current US legal system is designed to make the collateral consequences of a conviction history nearly impossible to shed, I was never able to help my clients fully gain the justice I believed they deserved. Far too often, the legal solutions available were only one step towards solving my clients' problems: I could help a debt-burdened client set up a payment plan for the fines and fees they owed from a criminal case, but I could not change the fact that they would be paying off debt for the rest of their life; I could guide a client through the complex process of applying for a job in an child care facility, but could not alter the stigma expressed by their potential employers. And too often, I had to tell a client that the law provided nothing for us to do.

Yet what I perceived as failures, my clients often saw as a step towards justice. What mattered most to my clients was not that I had come short of eliminating their problems, but that I had listened to their stories and tried to help. In the act of simply showing up for a client, I saw legal aid make a lasting impact.

I am grateful to Equal Justice America and Root & Rebound for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of formerly incarcerated people by showing them that someone is listening.