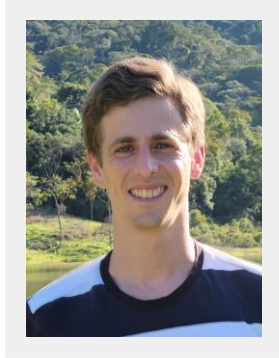




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: My first three weeks at CHIRLA have been invigorating in a number of ways.

First of all, I'm astonished by the amount of time and energy that the organization is investing in training us. From a library of prerecorded training videos that the staff has assembled to live training sessions to allowing us (the interns) to shadow attorneys and paralegals on client calls to sitting in on some of our own calls with clients, my supervisor and the other CHIRLA staff are doing an outstanding job of bringing us up to speed as quickly as possible.

Early on, I had the terrifying experience of getting two DACA grantee clients during my second or third day as an intern. Since then, I've gotten more comfortable with the idea of being a caseworker. I have seven clients at the moment, whose objectives range from renewing their DACA status to attaining U Visa status to naturalizing. I've also been helping other caseworkers in a variety of ways, including participating in a mass intake event over the weekend where we began work on the cases of dozens of clients.

Finally, hearing about the impossibly difficult circumstances that some of our clients have had to overcome throughout their journey has deepened my conviction that the US's current and historical bordering practices are indefensible.

Update 2: Minutes before I began to write this update about my experiences working for an immigration legal services nonprofit, I read the news story out of San Antonio, TX, about 40 migrants dying from heat stroke in the trailer of a truck. This news comes on the heels of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned; an event that seems to have shaken some Americans to their cores.

It seems significant that before coming home to this news, I had dinner with a woman who proudly told me of her work on President Obama's first campaign. On the drive back to my apartment, I reflected on my own feelings about Obama's presidency. I harbor no hatred towards Obama, I mused, but rather, I abhor any and every act of genocide. More specifically, I'm livid over Obama's (and Hillary Clinton's) genocidal policies towards the people of Honduras, of Guatemala, of Mexico, and of other Central American states, and towards



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

so many African youths (by way of their roles in facilitating Ghadaffi's assassination). Likewise, I don't hate the voters whose vitriol towards Trump is matched only by their adulation for Obama and Biden. Instead, I despise the fact that these people, who can so clearly see the folly—the evil even—in denying access to abortion can simultaneously be so unperturbed by the policies of death that Democrats continue to implement, albeit with less showmanship than Republicans.

It's incredibly disturbing to think that some of my young DACA clients—Dreamers, as they're called—who made the harrowing journey through the North Mexican desert with their parents in the 90's and early 2000's, might have ended up vulture-picked skeletons under the clear blue sky or cooked corpses in the back of a truck, if they'd simply been born later and attempted the journey today. And yet, that is precisely the state of migrants' "rights" under Obama-Trump-Biden.

Each one of my client's lives is a miracle. They remind me that every act of genocide is equally an act of fratricide, as all human beings are siblings in a single human family. And as I reflect on this horrific tragedy, I'm reminded, too, that the phrase "never again" has long outlived its usefulness. Today, it does more to obscure acts of genocide than to actually prevent them: it lulls us into believing that genocide can only be committed in gas chambers by men and women who adorn themselves with swastikas, but that it does not and cannot happen here.

Update 3: I'm now most of the way through my externship, with only a few weeks remaining to go. Over this past month and a half, I've helped 6 DACA recipients file their applications to renew their DACA status, including two who had waited much too long to begin the process. Fortunately, I was able to move quickly and get their applications in as fast as our organizational protocols would allow.

The experience of working with those clients pushing to get those applications out as quickly as possible further opened my eyes to a problem that I was already aware of but working with these clients put a human face to that problem. The problem is that, although DACA was put on the books to help young people who were brought to the US as children, rather than deciding for themselves to come, the government continues to make the renewal process challenging in two keyways. First, it charges \$495 for each renewal, a sum that is prohibitively expensive to many DACA recipients (CHIRLA has funding from the state of California to cover this fee for our clients). Second, it requires recipients to go through the highly involved, time-consuming process of renewing every two years. This may not sound very frequent, but it certainly must have felt that way to one of my clients, who had to make time for the renewal process amidst raising children, working full time, and pursuing a domestic violence case against a former partner. At the time of our consultation, she was also in the middle of packing all her belongings into boxes because she had to move out of her current dwelling. She had to interrupt the call several times to tell someone helping her which items went into which box.

It's hard to imagine a reason for these obstacles to exist other than to make it more likely that some DACA recipients will lose their DACA status, and within the current legal paradigm, those who lose their status are unable to get it back, as the government is not currently processing initial applications.

Update 4: As I approach the end of my time with CHIRLA, I'm so deeply grateful for everyone from my supervisor to all the paralegals who took the time out of their busy schedules to help me better understand this most important work that they do. It's inspiring to see the way that they work together to keep this legal services



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

machine moving. I've met just a fraction of the people who we helped in our small department during my time here, and I know that my department only helps a fraction of CHIRLA's total number of clients. But even so, these few encounters have given me a sense of how significant this work is, and of the relatively large scale on which CHIRLA does this work.

My own clients have been people pursuing citizenship, DACA status, permanent residency, and a U-Visa, and I know that CHIRLA helps with other forms of status relief as well. It's also been interesting — and quite sad — to see people bring in cases that we can't help them with, usually because doing so would be too resource intensive and would take our staff away from serving too many other clients. Likewise, it can be difficult to see that the help we provide to a client relates solely to their immigration status when it's clear that many of our clients face non-immigration challenges as well, including many related to poverty. Still, this has been a fantastic experience and it's one that I know I'll always be grateful for.

Update 5: My summer at CHIRLA gave me a much more hands on understanding of the work of immigration law than I would have gotten in a classroom. Everyone I worked with was incredibly talented and eager to offer me explanations of what this work involved — from the attorney who supervised me to the DOJ rep I reported to to several highly experienced paralegals who were kind enough to answer my questions. I got experience working for about a dozen clients and interacting with dozens more prospective clients, giving me a sense of the range of immigration-related issues that bring people to legal services organizations and some of the different ways that people interact with the legal system. Specifically, I got a significant amount of exposure to the DACA renewal process, prepared several FOIA requests and did work on a U-Visa case and naturalization cases. I also helped someone start the process of applying for advance parole.

I learned in more detail about the challenges that the immigration system poses to people with precarious immigration statuses. This precarity often goes hand in hand with other forms of precarity, making it very challenging for some people to navigate the bureaucracy of the immigration system even with the help of a caseworker. Others are able to do it but, in the case of many of our DACA renewal clients, need CHIRLA's help covering certain fees. The money we receive for this purpose is earmarked for California residents, meaning many young people with the same immigration needs from other states need this help but may not be getting it. I also learned about how to manage a caseload to which clients are being steadily added. My supervisor was very helpful in talking us through workload management strategies. And I saw for myself what I've always heard people say: that more than most other fields, immigration law changes with the wind; being current means always keeping up with ongoing developments.

Going back to school, I'll have a more concrete sense of how these government agencies that we talk about in class actually work. It's one thing to understand what their purpose is, but it's also helpful to understand what they're like to interact with. And to know how much work each of these interactions tends to entail for clients, who may very well have less time to dedicate to the legal process than I do. Likewise, it's important to understand how much a certain type of case will take up out of an attorney's own schedule, as many legal services non-profits focus on delivering the highest volume of work possible and may avoid taking on time consuming cases. Finally, along the lines of this last point, working at CHIRLA gave me a sense of the enormous scale of need that exists for immigration services — or reform — in this country.