



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:

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Update 1: I finished my first year of law school at UChicago in May, and now I'm interning at Legal Aid Chicago with the support of Equal Justice America. As part of the Children and Families Practice group, I'll be spending my summer helping clients to fight against unjust school expulsions and criminalized poverty indications in child welfare cases, and fight for Free Appropriate Public Education for children in the foster care system.

Update 2: Truthfully, it's been a depressing time to be in law school. My decision to go to law school was motivated by a desire to work towards a more just society. Like most millennials, I was raised in an era where "see you in court" felt like it was always an option to fight injustice—if you could get an issue in front of a federal judge, you could most likely get some kind of victory for progressive values.

The opposite is true now. How do I even pick the most depressing decisions of this term? Take your pick—Dobbs overturning Roe and taking away my reproductive rights, West Virginia v EPA dismantling the administrative state's response to climate change, NY State Rifle dramatically expanding the 2nd amendment based on a clear distortion of the historical record supposedly valued by the Court's conservative supermajority. We weren't kidding in 2016 when we said Roe was on the ballot (yes, I'm #StillWithHer); turns out so, so much more was as well.

I'm grateful for my internship at Legal Aid Chicago, supported by a Equal Justice America fellowship, for showing me some of the ways that lawyers can still use the law to fight and win for their clients—here, I can use legal training to help parents who are facing abuse/ neglect charges that are plainly criminalized poverty, or helping youth in care get the special education resources that they are entitled to under federal law.

Update 3: I'm well into the second half of my summer at Legal Aid Chicago now, and I've been reflecting on a conversation I recently had with one of the attorneys. In so many of our cases, there's an element of frustration that our role has to exist at all—we're fighting to get school systems to provide the accommodations that federal law guarantees they are entitled to or fighting to Department of Children and Family Services to follow their own procedures to ensure that children are not needlessly (and traumatically) separated from their parents. Of course, much more frustrating are the cases where despite an injustice, there isn't a legal recourse we can offer



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our clients. My hope is that there is some ecosystem effect—that through securing justice for our clients in individual cases, we provide a check of institutional accountability helps shift to more just practices in other cases as well.

Update 4: My summer at Legal Aid Chicago is drawing to a close. I'm actually off this week, as my brother Lawrence and his husband Chris brought my nephew to the Midwest and I'm soaking in all the auntie time I can. The final week of my internship will be next week, when all of the other interns in the Children and Families Practice Group will have finished this week. I recognize that shifting my internship timeline creates extra work—but no one blinked an eye when I asked for the time off. Which is one of the things that I've appreciated most about Legal Aid Chicago — they serve their mission of fighting for justice for their clients through the legal system while prioritizing work-life balance for their employees. It's been inspiring to see employees at many different stages of life being supported by the whole team at Legal Aid in meeting their diverse family and life commitments.

Update 5: This summer after my first year of law school at UChicago was full of things that I expected. I came into law school knowing that I wanted to try working in Legal Aid, specifically on fighting unjust family separation cases. I got a chance to do just that starting in May, when I began my internship at Legal Aid Chicago as part of the Children and Families Practice group. And because of the structure of the department, I got to work on a diverse range of other cases as well including helping clients fight against unjust school expulsions and criminalized poverty indications in child welfare cases, and fight for Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for children in the foster care system.

Reflecting back on my summer, I am particularly grateful for the friendships, conversations, and mentorship that I received at Legal Aid Chicago. A couple specifically stand out:

I am grateful for the Legal Aid Chicago lawyers who were willing to have difficult conversations about challenging topics. I am grateful to the senior attorney at Legal Action Chicago, who taught me about the change in legal aid regulation and Legal Services Corporation requirements in the 1980s/ 1990s that separated the functions of direct legal aid services for clients, with the public interest lawyers who bring class action challenges and lobby for legislative change. These changes have made it more difficult for the insights of legal aid attorneys about the structural barriers that their clients face to be translated into regulations and legal changes that help our clients. I am grateful for the Legal Aid Chicago attorney who described Legal Aid Chicago's change from neighborhood offices—where attorneys had less specialization, so there were more avoidable mistakes—to a highly specialized, siloed division model—which means less legal mistakes, but also a less client-centric process that can be frustrating for the people we're seeking to help.

I am grateful for the supervisor who acknowledged the element of frustration that the legal aid role has to exist at all. For example, I spent much of the summer working on a case where we were seeking transportation for one



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of our clients who was under the guardianship of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The school district was required by her Individualized Education Plan to provide transportation with a nurse, but was not. Despite a series of escalating legal challenges, over months, the school district refused to re-institute her bus service after pandemic disruptions, causing months of failure to receive a FAPE. Over the summer, Legal Aid Chicago had to seek, and won, a Temporary Restraining Order from a federal judge requiring the school district to resume transportation. The case was fascinating from a legal education perspective, as I got to see how complex federal litigation did and did not match what I had learned in Civ Pro, and research important and pressing questions. And in the end, we achieved transportation for our client. Yet despite the win, I often felt frustrated—so much time and money in legal costs were spent trying to get the school district to do the thing that it was federally required to do. How many more children could have been helped with the money spent on legal costs if the district hadn't fought?

I am also grateful for the continued offers of support from my former colleagues. They know how difficult it is to turn down big law money and pursue a public interest career, and all have been so willing to help me turn that dream into a reality.

This summer was possible in part because of the support of Equal Justice America.