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Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: The University of Texas School of Law

Organization: Texas Appleseed

Update 1: After years of deliberation, I decided to finally attend law school at The University of Texas School of Law. As soon as I gained admission, I knew I wanted to eventually work at Texas Appleseed, specifically on their Disaster Recovery and Fair Housing team. After working on Hurricane Maria relief efforts and COVID-19 response initiatives in Massachusetts, I saw how the communities hit hardest by natural disasters and public health crises were disproportionately low-income communities of color, and I saw how time and again these communities failed to receive their fair share of disaster recovery funds or investment in basic infrastructure. As I—or anyone who's grown up in a low-income community—can tell you, poverty makes people sicker, it leaves people vulnerable to disaster, and it diminishes people's political power after disaster strikes.

While I am thrilled to announce that my primary position this summer will be interning at Texas Appleseed on the Disaster Recovery and Fair Housing team, my secondary role will be to serve as a caretaker for my mother (shout-out to single moms!) who was recently diagnosed with cancer. Although I am conducting my internship remotely from my hometown in Lowell, Massachusetts, I have never felt closer to the communities I am trying to serve in Texas who I know are also struggling from poverty, environmental injustice, and chronic illness.

I really want to thank my team at Texas Appleseed for going above and beyond to accommodate me during this time. If you believe that low-income public interest students should get to serve the communities to which they are authentically connected, I encourage you to donate to Equal Justice America. Equal Justice America is the national leader in providing opportunities for law students to work with organizations that deliver civil legal services—the backbone of America's justice system.

Update 2: I am really enjoying my time at Texas Appleseed so far! In my first few weeks here, I worked to craft a response to a public information request made by my organization. The request was stymied by a governmental agency soon after the start of my internship. My employer's initial request involved data about applicants and recipients of the Harvey Homeowner Assistance Program. Access to this data would allow for greater transparency in terms of how Houston residents are benefitting from state-run disaster relief programs in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, one of the costliest disasters ever recorded in United States history. After



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conducting research on relevant case law around the Public Information Act in Texas, I argued that the public has a clear and legitimate interest in the information we requested, specifically because the communities most impacted by disasters like Hurricane Harvey continue to be low-income communities of color. Our response required a significant amount of research into former Attorney General opinions, current case law, and statutory law regarding exceptions to disclosure of public information.

One thing I have found striking about Texas Appleseed's work, is how intimately connected the organization is with community partners across Texas. These partners include advocacy organizations, legal services centers, and corporate law firms, among others. I have really appreciated this cross-collaboration, and I think it is helping me develop a greater understanding of how disaster recovery work needs to take place in order to be effective.

After filing our response with the Texas Attorney General's office, I have continued to work with our partners in Houston to mount a strategic opposition to the Texas Department of Transportation's planned I-45 highway expansion. This expansion will have immense consequences for Black and Hispanic-Latinx populations in Houston by paving over generational neighborhoods and displacing thousands of homes, businesses, and families.

Perhaps the most famous example of the disastrous effects involved with highway expansion is the Katy Freeway in Houston, which was widened to a whopping 25 lanes in 2011. Years later, traffic congestion on this highway has not gotten better—in fact, it has worsened due to induced demand created by the expansion. Highway expansions like these don't just result in increased traffic, they compromise pedestrian safety and air quality, and continue a historic pattern of destroying homes, businesses, and schools within Black and Brown communities.

Being from Massachusetts, I can't help comparing this expansion to one of the most famous highway removal projects in United States history: the Big Dig. Generations before me have relayed the painful challenges involved with the megaproject, but my generation and future generations will reap its benefits: a reduction in traffic and carbon emissions, the reconnection of previously displaced neighborhoods, and the addition of beautiful tree-lined boulevards, parks, and water features constructed in the path of the old highway.

While the I-45 highway expansion is currently on pause, I am now working to put together a Know-Your-Rights guide for homeowners in Houston, in the event that their property is taken by eminent domain. Our community partners want to be able to disperse this guide as they begin more community engagement efforts and door-knocking throughout the city, so my work product will ostensibly help thousands of residents in understanding their legal rights during condemnation proceedings.

As I am conducting my internship remotely, I won't be able to visit Houston this summer. However, in the fall, I would like to be able to participate in this door-knocking campaign and hope to encourage more Texas Law students to join in as well.

Update 3: In the past two weeks I have been able to conduct more research on the Uniform Relocation Act and eminent domain proceedings in Texas. I have also been strategizing with my supervisor on potential



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arguments we can adopt in order to protect low-income communities of color who are at risk of displacement due to the planned I-45 highway expansion.

Additionally, I have been working in tandem with partners situated in Puerto Rico and along the Gulf Coast to create a joint policy map on needed changes to the American disaster response system. Having already worked on disaster relief efforts in Puerto Rico, I feel very honored to be able to delve into these issues more deeply and in a more systematic and unified way.

Update 4: This month marks the five-year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey's destructive impact on Texas. Much of my work these past few weeks has involved assessing whether governmental entities such as FEMA, the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC), and the Central Texas Council of Governments have equitably disbursed disaster relief assistance to low-income communities of color. I have also assisted in the marketing around regionalized disaster relief toolkits—a web series that plots how much disaster assistance has been disbursed to socially vulnerable communities in various regions across the United States.

I also worked to support my manager in submitting official comments in conjunction with Bayou City Water Keeper, on H-GAC's Preliminary Method of Distribution (MOD) for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. We conveyed that H-GAC's decision to exclude Harris County, where 72% of the region's people of color reside, from their distribution of CDBG funds was a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the Fair Housing Act.

Finally, I helped my colleagues prepare a presentation on equitable disaster relief which was featured in Ayuda Legal's conference focused on a just recovery in Puerto Rico post-Maria.

Update 5: This summer I worked as an intern under Texas Appleseed's Fair Housing and Disaster Recovery team. Throughout the summer, I was able to delve into policy issues that I could never fully explore during my previous work within disaster philanthropy in post-Maria Puerto Rico. Because Texas has weathered the impact of five major hurricanes over the past two decades, I was able to learn the severe shortcomings that take place during each phase of the disaster recovery process in the state—whether it was emergency services, short-term recovery, or long-term rebuilding.

Much of my work this summer involved analyzing whether governmental entities such as FEMA, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and the General Land Office have equitably disbursed disaster relief assistance to low-income communities of color and those disproportionately impacted by recurrent natural disasters. Through requests for information filed pursuant to the Texas Public Information Act and official comments filed with H-GAC, I helped convey the systemic underfunding of regions like Harris County, where 72% of the region's people of color reside. This routine exclusion of low-income communities from the distribution of Community Development Block Grant funding constitutes a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the Fair Housing Act. In turn, this failure to incorporate civil rights and fair housing requirements into disaster



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recovery planning and implementation denies equitable recovery to the hardest hit communities and exacerbates existing inequalities.

I also learned that our current national statutory disaster recovery scheme is not set up to handle catastrophic regional disasters like Hurricane Harvey. The bulk of disaster recovery funding lies within federal assistance, however, in order to unlock this funding, states must request a declaration of large-scale disaster. This process often stymies and delays the flow of urgently needed resources. To combat this inefficiency, I have been working in tandem with partners situated in Puerto Rico and along the Gulf Coast to assist in the creation of a joint policy map on needed changes to the American disaster response system.

My other role this summer entailed serving as a caretaker for my single mother who was recently diagnosed with cancer. As I—or anyone who's grown up in a low-income community—can tell you, poverty makes people sicker, it leaves people vulnerable to disaster, and it diminishes people's political power after disaster strikes. Although I conducted my internship remotely from my hometown in Lowell, Massachusetts, I felt my service towards my mother offered a source of connection to the communities I am trying to serve in Texas who I know are also struggling from poverty, environmental injustice, and chronic illness.

I am incredibly grateful to Equal Justice America for investing in me this summer and making my public interest career attainable.