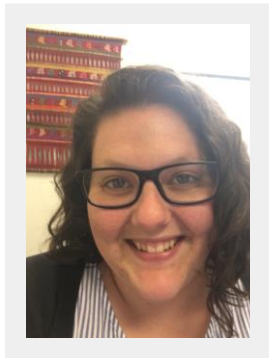




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Update 1:** “It takes a village.” Usually this turn of phrase is used in reference to raising a child. However, I have been thinking about it over the past two weeks in the context of legal aid work. Given the nature of legal aid organizations, many are underfunded and overworked, meaning they are often at capacity. This provides a unique opportunity for partnership, which enables legal aid organizations to fill in the gaps of service to best advocate for and fulfill the needs of a client. At Empire Justice Center, this has taken the form of partnering between offices, so that a remote client can sign documents in front of an in-person notary. It has involved partnering with other aid organizations to provide translation services for a deaf client. It has also involved an email chain with multiple practice groups in the organization discussing what organizations it would be best to partner with on a harassment/assault case that involves multiple areas of law. In this case, partnering with multiple legal aid organizations that are experts on the different legal issues presented means the client will have access to better advocacy, than if one organization had needed to spend the time and manpower to become an expert in all applicable areas of law. In other words, we can do more when we work together.

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**Update 2:** I’ve been thinking a lot about attorney’s fees lately, and the role they play in public interest law. Similar to many public interest organizations, my host organization is primarily funded by grants. Attorney’s fees make up a small percentage of the budget, but because they are discretionary funds, they are vital to the smooth operation of the organization. Thus, it is important to the organization that it takes cases with the potential for attorney’s fees. Because of their importance, I can see how the potential for Attorney’s fees could lead an organization to prioritize fee cases over providing legal assistance in instances where there is not a possibility for attorney’s fees. I think that because of that possibility, it is important for organizations to balance the needs of the organization with the service they are able to provide. Organizations wouldn’t be able to provide as much legal assistance if it wasn’t for the attorney’s fees cases they take, so striking a balance is vital to meet both the needs of the organization and the needs of the communities it serves.

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**Update 3:** This past week I worked on a research project for our Consumer Finance Program. It was an interesting research project because the question asked what laws and regulations would be affected if the definition of a single phrase was changed? In law school, we are taught that definitions are incredibly important because they allow lawyers, law makers, and everyday people to understand what a law is about, what the law means, who is affected by the law, etc. Over the course of my legal education, I have been assigned multiple cases where the entire decision was dependent on the definition of a single word. I found this research project to be really informative because it gave me the chance to see how changing a definition for the purpose of consumer finance protections, can impact completely different areas of law. I also thought changing a definition was an interesting way to make a policy change. When I think of policy change, I generally think of an amendment or an entirely new law. This was a new idea for me, and I think the possibility of changing definitions can be used to make some very impactful, and widespread, changes, given how important definitions are in various bodies of law.

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**Update 4:** This week we had to turn away a potential client because they did not meet the income eligibility limit. This was the first time since I started working at Empire Justice Center that this has happened during an intake meeting I was at, and it was really disappointing for me. I wanted to come to law school and go into public interest work to help people. This client was in need of help, but was just barely over our income limit, so we had to refer them to other practices. This reiterated the importance of networking and partnership for legal services. Since we knew who else in the community would be able to competently represent this client's legal needs, we were able to confidently refer them to a few other lawyers, whom we knew would be able to help them at their income level. My supervisor knew this information because of the work he has done to meet other public service attorneys, understand what they do, who they can provide services to, and how their organizations work. He has worked with these attorneys in the past, and has referred many other clients to them. So, this client will still be able to get the legal help they need, because of the partnerships and networks that have been established among public interest lawyers in this community.

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**Update 5:** My internship this past summer was very fulfilling. I was fortunate enough to work on many different types of projects, which allowed me to gain experience in many different areas. I came into this summer with some experience in public interest law and was excited to bring what I had previously learned into my summer internship. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to gain more experience and knowledge that I will carry with me moving forward. In particular, one of the main lessons I learned this summer was that we do not get to choose our clients. A case may be complicated by a client's past, but that client has the same rights as everyone else. In addition, this summer taught me to think outside the box. At law school, we are typically taught how to think like a lawyer, but at times this can feel narrow and be unhelpful depending on the situation. It was refreshing to be around lawyers with different ideas and ways of handling specific cases. For example, one of the projects I worked on looked at the impact changing the definition of a word, rather than amending specific statutes. There was a creative solution to achieve the policy change goal, and is not one that I



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would have thought of. Now, after having worked on this project, looking at different ways to make changes to laws, outside of just amendments, is something I will be more likely to think of in the future.

This summer also reiterated the importance of working with other public interest groups. No single public interest organization can possibly provide all the legal services a potential client needs. Some organizations have income caps, others specialize only in specific areas of law, and many are working at capacity and unable to take on new clients. Working with other attorneys and other organizations allows clients to get the full range of legal services they need.

Finally, this summer emphasized that legal service organizations are vital, but many of the issues our clients face would be remedied with meaningful policy changes. Without policy changes, the many systemic problems our clients face will continue to impede their own, and many others, lives. Prior to this summer, I had lost sight of the value of policy change and had focused primarily on direct service to clients. This summer reminded me of the importance of policy change and the impact it can have. In the future, I will keep both direct service and policy change in mind as solutions to legal issues in the area of public interest law.

This summer was an incredible experience for me, and only solidified my interest in pursuing public interest law while I am still in law school, as well as upon graduation.