



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Erica Taft

**Law School:** Boston College Law School

**Organization:** De Novo Center for Justice and Healing

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**Update 1:** It's hard to believe that I'm already halfway through my JD/MSW program at Boston College! Over the past two years, I've enjoyed learning from incredible social workers and attorneys alike, in the areas of criminal legal system reform, mental health access, and children's rights.

This summer, I am so excited to join the De Novo Center for Justice and Healing, where I am working as a Legal Intern in the Immigration Unit this summer, and a Macro Social Work Intern through the summer and school year. De Novo is an interdisciplinary organization, offering both legal aid and counseling services to low-income community members in the areas of housing and homelessness prevention, family law, disability benefits, and immigration. For those who know me well – yes, this does feel like a perfect match!

I feel so grateful for the opportunity to join an organization that values this interdisciplinary approach as much as I do and am excited to learn more about how attorneys and social workers can work together to offer holistic support for our communities.

I am especially grateful for the support of Equal Justice America, an organization that provides funding for law students interning at legal aid providers nationwide. I am honored to be an EJA Fellow this summer, and to join this inspiring community of students pursuing careers in public interest law.

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**Update 2:** As a Legal Intern with De Novo's Immigration Team this summer, I have the opportunity of working with clients seeking asylum in the United States. Asylum is a status granted to people fleeing their home country due to persecution or fear of persecution based on their race, religion, gender, nationality, or membership in a particular social group. The asylum seekers we serve may be survivors of torture or violence based on their identity – such as gender, sexual orientation, or political opinion.

The asylum process is extremely long. After submitting an initial application, many asylum seekers wait in limbo for years before their asylum interview is scheduled. The waiting period is a time filled with uncertainty and fear of being denied. At De Novo, we focus on small victories as much as possible, but it's hard not to feel the weight of such a slow-moving process. Alarmingly, even after such long waits, the Boston Asylum Office currently has only a 15.5% rate of approval. This rate is one of the lowest in the country, second only to New



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York's rate of 10.6%. Compare these numbers to San Francisco's 52.4%, and it's no question that this disparity is troubling. A recent report describes the cultural biases and fatigue that leads to Boston's low approval rating and calls for a formal investigation. Many Congresspeople have since echoed this call.

If you're interested, read more here: <https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/06/28/boston-asylum-office-low-approval-rate>

I have already learned so much about the intricacies of the asylum process and am so grateful to my supervisors and our clients as we work towards asylum! That said, there's so much more to learn, and as I read briefings and watch webinars, I frequently think of the many people who don't have access to legal aid or can't afford an attorney and go through this process unrepresented. Access to civil legal services is a question of ensuring justice for all, and I am excited to be a part of Equal Justice America's mission to ensure access to pro bono assistance for vulnerable populations.

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**Update 3:** Did you know that people who work with trauma survivors can develop secondary traumatic stress?

STS is a natural emotional response to hearing about the traumatic experience of a significant other, or from helping or wanting to help a traumatized person. It can manifest as PTSD-like symptoms, including insomnia, intrusive thoughts, and hyper-vigilance, interfering with an individual's personal and professional life. People who work in the helping professions, such as public interest attorneys, may experience STS.

I want to take this EJA Fellow Update to acknowledge the effects of working in public interest law on the mental health of law students and attorneys. I'm dedicating some of my time at De Novo Center for Justice and Healing this summer to learning about how attorneys can care for themselves and one another in order to maintain their mental health and better serve their clients. To my classmates at Boston College Law School and to other law students and attorneys everywhere: please take a moment today to check in with and show up for yourself, your colleagues, friends, and community.

If you're interested in learning more about this topic, I'm currently reading and recommending Trauma Stewardship by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk!

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**Update 4:** One of my favorite parts about interning in legal aid is that every day brings new challenges and learning opportunities! These days, I am spending my time on a variety of projects. In particular, I'm working with a client to file her asylum application, which looks like frequent client meetings to perfect her affidavit, lots of research on country conditions, and other tasks like getting important documents translated. In the meantime, I am also working on legal research for other asylum cases. I am so grateful for the opportunity to develop skills in both legal research and writing while also working directly with clients!

In legal aid, there's always work to be done. I marvel at our attorneys' dedication to their clients, which often means tackling many different types of projects throughout each day. With every new skill, lesson, and technique I learn at De Novo Center for Justice and Healing, I think of each person who is navigating the court system alone and without legal aid, whether in the world of immigration law or another legal context.