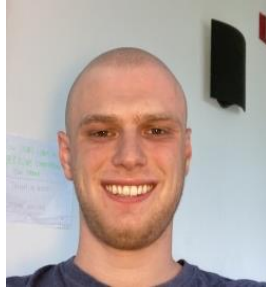




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Sam Grossman

**Law School:** Cornell Law School

**Organization:** Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline

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**Update 1:** A thread with my first EJA Fellow update as a Cornell Law Equal Justice America Fellow for Summer 2022 at the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline:

My first few weeks have shown me the importance of counsel for indigent individuals. A large part of my internship is offering pro bono legal advice to tenants facing issues with habitability, security deposits, and in the most extreme cases, tenants facing eviction.

When a tenant faces eviction, in many cases, that tenant is at risk of facing homelessness. Despite these massive consequences, tenants do not have a right to counsel in these proceedings. Low-income individuals may have to argue their own case against a highly paid lawyer.

Now, LawNY honorably defends the most vulnerable of these tenants, but there is much more to be done. People on the verge of losing housing are on the verge of losing a basic human right. They need quality representation without condition.

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### **Update 2:**

A thread with my second EJA Fellow update as a Cornell Law Equal Justice America Fellow for Summer 2022 at the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline:

The hotline has shown me ways that landlords can manipulate the inability of tenants to obtain counsel. The majority of my clients are low-income Ithacans or students. For both these demographics, landlords have ways of using their tenant's situation for their own financial gain.

On Ithacans: I have seen landlords integrate illegal clauses into leases, like retaining first AND last month's rent, despite this practice being made illegal recently. For Ithacans under or near the poverty line, this practice can mean a tenant must go hungry for a month.

On students: I have seen landlords retain security deposits for illegal reasons. Students are unlikely to know or understand landlord-tenant law, and landlords often remain inaccessible to students who have returned to their hometown. They may purposely ignore calls and emails.



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My work at the Tenants Legal Hotline has helped to bridge the gap in bargaining power between landlords and tenants. I am ecstatic at the opportunity to empower my clients with knowledge of the law.

If you're motivated to help causes like the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline, please consider donating to Equal Justice America, who funds law students to spend their summers working with organizations devoted to equal representation.

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**Update 3:** A thread with my third EJA Fellow update as a Cornell Law Equal Justice America Fellow for Summer 2022 at the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline:

In my first year of law school, my lawyering professor taught some of the intricacies of client interaction. We learned strategies for eliminating "Legalese" when explaining complex legal concepts. We also practiced how to respond to certain hypothetical scenarios, for example:

an emotional client may call their attorney incessantly with questions. This summer, I have heard tales from one of my coworker's experiences with relentless clients. However, I have myself found trouble making and continuing contact with clients.

I am not bothered by a client's failure to call back or respond to an email. While potential eviction and issues of habitability are severe, they can be the 4th or 5th thing on a client's plate. The nature of pro bono work dictates working with people in complicated situations.

Hearing some of these situations has shown me why clients from all backgrounds deserve quality legal representation, regardless of income, citizenship status, race, ability, gender, or religion.

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**Update 4:** A thread with my fourth EJA Fellow update as a Cornell Law Equal Justice America Fellow for Summer 2022 at the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline:

A recurring issue that I have seen this summer is landlords being extremely unresponsive to their tenants' needs and concerns. Tenants have reported immense struggles in getting their landlord to respond to emails and phone calls.

I have also seen countless illegal lease provisions. Landlords leave in clauses that run contrary to public policy because they know that tenants typically do not know the law. Even if a tenant does know the law, there are not extensive consequences for these illegal provisions.

These actions by landlords fit more broadly into landlords' tendencies to close their eyes and pretend a problem is not occurring. Unless tenants are empowered with equal representation to their landlords, there will always be a gross imbalance in bargaining power.



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To support causes like the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline, please consider donating. EJA supports downtrodden communities, like renters, by allowing talented law students to spend their summers working with civil legal services organizations.

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**Update 5:** A thread with my fifth and final EJA Fellow update as a Cornell Law Equal Justice America Fellow for Summer 2022 at the Ithaca Tenants Legal Hotline:

My experience this summer evoked many different emotions. Among them: sadness, confusion, joy, and resentment.

I felt sad for the numerous Ithaca tenants who are forced to deal with landlord-tenant issues on top of other concerns in their already-busy lives. I hated hearing the genuine fear in these tenants' voices thinking that they could become homeless at a moment's notice.

I was confused that Ithaca, a town which prides itself on progressive housing policies, has such a staggering lack of enforcement for said policies. It sometimes took the collective action of housing collectives to give "teeth" to local ordinances.

I felt joy that my organization, the Tenants Legal Hotline, was able to provide such meaningful help to tenants across Ithaca in a matter that the government refused to. I genuinely feel that the hotline and Legal Assistance of Western NY provides tenants with a strong

alternative to the traditional "right to counsel" that Ithaca has punted on thus far. The work of these two organizations does wonders to keep Ithaca tenants from becoming homeless.

Finally, I felt resentment at the difference in access to quality legal counsel that traditionally exists in the landlord-tenant relationship. While civil legal service organizations can bridge this gap in a place like Ithaca, which happens to have a sizable number of

individuals dedicated to tenant rights, other areas in upstate NY, and beyond, may continue to provide perpetuate existing inequalities through the legal system. Landlords, by nature of having more money, are going to be able to hire stronger lawyers than tenants.

So, organizations like EJA are essential for bridging this gap. By providing grants to talented law students, emerging lawyers are able to gain real world experience, make a positive difference, and support themselves financially all at the same time.