



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: Michigan State University

Organization: Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School

Update 1: This summer, I received a grant from Equal Justice America to volunteer for the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Harvard Law School. As part of my fellowship, I promised to fundraise for Equal Justice America to support other students working on projects ranging from temporary restraining orders for domestic violence victims to disability rights advocacy.

Equal Justice America is an independent non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation established in 1993. Every donation is tax-deductible, and each dollar supports legal aid projects nationwide. If you plan on giving charitably this year, please consider donating to Equal Justice America to ensure continued access to critical services.

Update 2: It is time for my second EJA Fellow Update, and I am thrilled to tell you how things have progressed at the Legal Services Center. Right now, I have cases for three veterans who have PTSD due to combat or Military Sexual Trauma. I am working on getting each of them their VA education, housing, and compensation entitlements. When I began this project, I did not realize how typical a poor experience with a Chain of Command is for an enlisted person. I assumed all my experiences were because of who I was and not how the military behaves as an institution. While I undoubtedly did not help my own situation by trusting admin, I have discovered that the military bakes into its governing documents the idea that promotion, awards, and good service will not make it into a service member's record. I found it genuinely eye-opening the number of errors an admin department can willfully make to try to derail a person's life who is already suffering. The only way to correct the record is by filing briefs with the Board of Corrections for Military Records, and the process is just as confusing and demanding as one might expect. With about 20% of corrections submitted approved, getting a soldier, sailor, or airman's good service recognized is nearly impossible without effective advocacy. The Legal Services Center at Harvard Law provides this advocacy for veterans in Massachusetts, and the program is pro-bono. Many states do not have similarly situated programs, and the veteran population suffers from it. One thing we can do to ensure that the most vulnerable clients receive the best legal aid is by donating to Equal Justice America. Equal Justice America supports pro-bono public service programs throughout the country, providing equitable access to effective advocacy. Your taxdeductible gift makes projects like mine possible. We



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have raised \$13,000 of our \$20,000 goal so far, and it is only because of the generosity of people like yourself. Any and all support is appreciated, and I thank you for it.

Update 3: I wanted to provide an update on my work at the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School for my Equal Justice America Fellowship! It's been an EXTREMELY eventful month! Since starting, I have been assigned to three veteran clients assisting them with filing Discharge Upgrades Petitions, Veteran Affairs Appeals, and Massachusetts Chapter 115 Benefits. Additionally, I have filed a Freedom of Information Act request against the US Army requesting an ALARACT detailing 30% of Army Commanders are noncompliant with its Alcohol and Substance Abuse Prevention program. I am overjoyed working with such deserving clients and a fantastic team of student practitioners and supervising attorneys. I greatly appreciate Equal Justice America supporting this project and am proud to represent Michigan State University College of Law while working in Boston. EJA supports public interest work throughout the United States.

Update 4: Next week is my last week at the Legal Services Center, and I wanted to reflect on why I find this work so compelling for my EJA Fellow Update. As many of you know, I spent eight years in the Navy. I served with country boys from Alabama, city girls from Atlanta, a guy obsessed with Charlotte, a highly self-promoting man from Texas, and many folks like me from Michigan, to name a few. We had 18-24 hour workdays for months, usually having just two instead of three square meals daily. The military is a hard life, and we chose to live it for several reasons. While we undoubtedly joined for the ethereal goals of service, duty, and sacrifice, many of us did it for the benefits promised to veterans.

An ever-shrinking number of veterans receive benefits because of novel ways the military categorizes discharges. I decided to work at the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School to learn how to correct the record for those veterans who receive an other than honorable discharge. This summer, I had the opportunity to work with three clients, and two of them received education and healthcare benefits during my time here. Though the men and women in the picture are not my clients, they are my shipmates, and it is them I think about while I am writing my briefs.

Update 5: It's time for my last EJA Fellow Update. I cannot believe I start my final semester at Michigan State in just a week. The whole summer flew by, but I learned a ton. After interning at Harvard Law Schools Legal Services Center, I feel prepared to take the Michigan Bar this February and begin practicing Veterans Law.

This summer in Boston made me more confident in my brief writing and research abilities. I spent a large portion of my time researching the Code of Massachusetts Regulation on the independence of a presiding officer from an appointed counsel.

The people of Massachusetts elected officials to appoint presiding officers to carry out specific duties under the law. Massachusetts law requires that presiding officers in hearings make decisions independently and



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impartially. However, certain agencies within the State created offices of general counsel that advised presiding officers without a regulatory mandate. Because the statute did not require a general counsel, any sub-regulatory general counsel could not advise on cases before a presiding officer without compromising the independence of the decision. I spent the most time researching cases and statutes for my client's discharge upgrade cases. When the military discharges a veteran, the veteran receives a Department of Defense form 214 (DD214) that lists the character of discharge in addition to the narrative reason for discharge. While most veterans receive an honorable discharge, a growing minority of veterans receive general discharges under honorable conditions or other than honorable discharges. In many instances, an other than honorable discharge prevents a veteran from receiving critical healthcare, compensation, and education benefits.

I wanted to take this externship because I know many veterans who got short-changed due to ineffective chains of command. Many have other than honorable discharges, and many others suffer from injuries sustained on nearly year-long deployments. I am proud to have served with these men and women and pleased that I could assist fellow servicemembers this summer. I look forward to continuing working with veterans and their loved ones following my graduation in December.

My work this summer would not have been possible without the generous fellowship from Equal Justice America. Equal Justice America provides stipends for students like myself to pursue opportunities to help low-income clients.

As a nonprofit, Equal Justice America relies upon fundraising to continue providing student opportunities in public interest law. So far, we have raised \$16,940 of our \$20,000 goal. I want to thank every person who donated; I am so grateful to have friends and colleagues who recognize this vital work.

From filing for protective orders on behalf of victims of domestic violence to drafting briefs supporting veterans' appeals, Equal Justice America Fellows give greater legal aid access to those who need it most. If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation to Equal Justice America, please do so.