



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

LEGAL SERVICES FELLOWSHIPS

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update #1: Introduction to GBLS and EJA - At this point I am officially one month into my summer co-op, which means it is time for my first EJA Fellow Update. For those of you who don't know, I am currently working in the housing unit at Greater Boston Legal Services and have been selected as one of this year's Equal Justice America Fellows! I am so grateful that my first experience working in a legal setting is with two organizations who share my values of providing services to all who need it regardless of income, citizenship status, race, ability, gender, or religion. Between working on cases with my supervisor, attending trainings and advocacy events, and sitting in on meetings with grass root organizers and AG employees, I've had a wonderful experience so far and am excited for what's to come!

Update #2: Emergency Duty - Oftentimes access to justice is limited to those who understand their rights and how to exercise them. One of the many ways that the Housing Unit at Greater Boston Legal Services tries to rectify this barrier is by offering free legal advice. Daily, rotating attorneys interrupt their regular caseload to run the Emergency Duty phone line which sometimes means helping to file confusing paperwork and other times helping tenants stay in their homes. Working with one client, I had the honor to hear about this single mother's struggle with her landlord and help to support and encourage her while she tries to maintain her right to stay in her home—despite what the landlord has turned into a very uncomfortable living situation. Direct client services are difficult, but I appreciate the lawyers whom I am surrounded by who do this work daily. While we need new laws and policies to make just housing more permanent, I appreciate what GBLS is doing to be a part of the temporary solution, and I am happy to be a part of it myself.

Update #3: Affordable Housing - Earning minimum wage, a Boston resident would have to work 3.3 full time jobs to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market value. Over half of Boston residents are considered rent-burdened, which means that over 30% of their income goes toward paying rent. The reality of the housing crisis in Boston means that low- and middle-income residents are being forced out of their neighborhoods, with BIPOC communities impacted most.

This summer I am grateful to have been included in meetings with Coalition for a Truly Affordable Boston

(CTAB) and Boston Tenant Coalition (BTC) as they advocate for new policies that would promote a more affordable Boston. Last week, members of these coalitions met with top policy and housing advisors in the new mayoral administration to propose solutions for the housing affordability crisis. Their asks emphasized appropriate urgency as it is hard to reverse gentrification once people have already been forced out of their homes. Through researching the Zoning Enabling Act, Boston Zoning Code, and federal and state case law on the constitutionality of zoning, I have been crafting legal arguments and defenses for different proposed actions that we are imploring the city to take. It has been meaningful to be in a position where I can learn from lawyers who use the law as a tool for advocacy, especially when that advocacy recognizes the importance of housing as a human right.

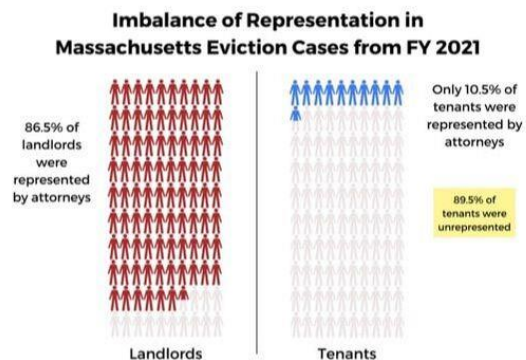
If you're interested in learning more about the rent crisis in America, check out this well-researched and highly entertaining video on housing: <https://lnkd.in/g7mJuitQ>

Update #4: Pro Se Tenants/MADE - Anyone who has watched an action film or courtroom drama is likely familiar with the Miranda Rights. Among other protections, police recite, "You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you." What some people, including a client I talked to today, may not know is that the right to counsel is only guaranteed in criminal cases. That means that many tenants who are trying to fight eviction claims in housing court must do so on their own, in pro se proceedings. In Massachusetts this has resulted in bleak disparities, as seen in the info graph below. Massachusetts Right to Counsel Coalition is actively working to eliminate this disparity.

In the interim, however, attorneys and community members have designed creative solutions to assist tenants in representing themselves in eviction proceedings. One of the solutions is a program called Massachusetts Defense for Eviction (MADE). Authored by a housing attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services, this program guides tenants through case-specific information and forms so that they can file an Answer and Discovery on their own. This program can also help attorneys and social workers to file Answer and Discovery forms in a more efficient manner. This past week I was able to assist a tenant in telling her side of the story as we walked through the MADE program together. #ejafellowupdate

If you or someone you know is being affected by the eviction crisis or works with tenants who are facing eviction in Massachusetts, use MADE to help efficiently file an Answer and Discovery: <https://lnkd.in/eCTM4kRd>

To learn more about why the right to counsel is so important in eviction cases visit this link: <https://lnkd.in/eTtH7Qyt>.



Update # 5: Final Thoughts - Time for my final EJA Fellow Update! I can't believe that my first co-op is almost over. As I reflect on my summer, I find myself incredibly grateful to go to a school that values experiential learning and to be hired by an organization that prioritizes their intern's experiences. I am especially grateful to Equal Justice America for the funding that allowed me to take this position.

Working in the Housing Unit for Greater Boston Legal Services has been an incredible introduction to legal aid work. I began law school and my search for a co-op hoping for a diversified experience serving low-income clients. GBLS has provided just that—all while connecting me to many incredible professionals across different offices and organizations in Boston. Amidst learning about some devastating realities in Boston, and some failures of the legal system, it has been refreshing to meet so many individuals who are so committed to promoting equal access to justice and advocating for affordable housing.

Partaking in direct client services, hours of research, and community advocacy events and meetings, I am much more confident in the type of setting I would like to work in post-graduation. A few highlights from the summer have been meeting with local advocacy organizations, negotiating with the Attorney General's Office, shadowing the Attorney-for-the-Day program at the Housing Court, walking clients through pro se Answer and Discovery forms, participating in advocacy and training efforts led by GBLS's CORI program and GBLS's immigration office, and thoroughly researching issues of Fair Housing and zoning in Boston.

I have undoubtedly grown in my research, writing, and interpersonal skills this summer. I feel confident in my ability to help process difficult cases and honor the dignity of my clients, as I meet them at a very vulnerable point in their own journey.

As always, if you feel compelled to support Equal Justice America so they can continue to fund more students have experiences like this, consider donating.