



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



Name: Ally Morcus

Law School: Notre Dame

Organization: Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Update 1: I am so honored to have been chosen as an Equal Justice America (EJA) Summer Fellow. EJA is a non-profit that provides support to law students pursuing work with organizations that provide civil legal aid services. This summer, I am interning at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) in Chicago, assisting with impact litigation and policy research in the areas of voting rights, immigrants' rights, education, and employment rights. I have already gained incredible experience in my first two weeks at MALDEF, from drafting discovery requests in an immigrants' rights case and analyzing employment discrimination doctrines to researching upcoming local elections and creating presentations in Spanish.

Update 2: It's hard to believe that I'm already almost halfway done with my summer internship. Interning at MALDEF - Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund has been such an incredible learning experience, and I know it will be a difficult goodbye when the summer ends.

So far, I've had the opportunity to work on employment, immigrants' rights, and voting rights cases. Recently, I got the chance to practice my Spanish (which is a little rusty after not using it for a while). I joined an intake call with a potential client who speaks only Spanish, and I was able to listen to her story and ask her a few questions about experiencing housing discrimination. I spend most of my time conducting legal research and writing, so getting the opportunity to speak directly with the people impacted by our work is always a meaningful experience. It's an important reminder that there are real people behind the cases we're working on.

Update 3: Working at a public interest organization during my 1L summer has given me so much hands-on experience that I'm not sure I would have gotten in a different context. Working in such a small office means that everyone is given a lot of responsibility, including the interns. Being trusted to draft the written discovery and deposition outlines for two immigrants' rights cases we have in progress was intimidating, but exciting. There was little guidance available about what kinds of questions we should ask so I had to use some creativity, because these cases are actually the first time a suit has ever been filed under the relevant statute in Illinois (a



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

statute which was just recently passed in 2019, preventing landlords from threatening to call ICE on their tenants). It's thrilling to know that I'm doing meaningful work on a case that could set the precedent for how Illinois courts apply this statute going forward.

Ultimately, I could not have better things to say about my experience interning at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund this summer, and it makes me genuinely sad to know that I have such little time left here.

Update 4: It's hard to believe that next week will be my last week interning at Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. This summer has gone by so quickly, and I'm going to miss this organization and my coworkers dearly.

Throughout the summer, I have been able to participate in several intake calls with clients. There is definitely a learning curve when it comes to figuring out which questions are the most important ones to ask and how to approach sensitive topics. Unfortunately, many people come to us who we can't help. Some people share awful stories of mistreatment, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have a legal discrimination claim. As our paralegal recently had to tell a client, morality and the law don't always align. Although we are often able to refer these clients to other organizations, having to turn people down is a disheartening side of public interest work I had never considered before.

In other news, we have been in the middle of discovery for an immigrants' rights case throughout my time here, and I have been lucky enough to gain hands-on experience throughout the process. I started by drafting interrogatories and deposition outlines, and I recently had the opportunity to conduct research and write a memo that ultimately informed the attorneys' strategy going into a hearing next week. It is incredibly exciting to see my work being put to use in court!

Once again, I am so thankful to both MALDEF and Equal Justice America for making it possible for me to do such meaningful and gratifying work.

Update 5: While it saddens me to share that my summer internship at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund has come to an end, I have nothing but gratitude in my heart for the experience. First and foremost, I am extremely thankful for the support of Equal Justice America, without which I and so many other law students may not have been able to pursue public interest opportunities this summer. I am also incredibly thankful for every attorney and staff member in MALDEF's Chicago office who provided me with unceasing guidance and support throughout the summer. I truly learned so much from their mentorship. Working in such a small, tight-knit office meant that I was entrusted with substantial responsibility, even as a 1L, and that I was able to receive extensive feedback on my work. Smaller public interest organizations like MALDEF have so much on their plates and not nearly enough resources to get it all done—yet they always do, because everyone



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

who works there is so incredibly passionate about the work. I am honored to have been able to provide an extra set of hands to help advance the organization's mission this summer.

Prior to my experience at MALDEF, I knew relatively little about impact litigation. When I thought of public interest work, traditional legal aid organizations and other nonprofit groups which provide direct client services to people in need were what came to mind. The work that MALDEF does is somewhat different in character from the work those organizations do, but it is, undoubtedly, still public interest work. Although MALDEF takes on individual clients who share the same characteristics of those typically represented by other legal aid organizations—for example, low-income folks who would otherwise have difficulty affording an attorney—the core of MALDEF's work is impact litigation. We had dozens of client intake calls per month, and while we wished we could help each and every individual who came to us, MALDEF simply doesn't have the capacity to do so. Thus, in making the decision as to which clients' cases to pursue, the attorneys would have to consider which cases were likely to have a broader impact on the legal landscape. For example, the case I primarily worked on throughout the summer is the first case ever brought under Illinois's recently-passed Immigrant Tenant Protection Act. Winning this case would mean that MALDEF not only helps the individual plaintiff in the case, but also gets to play a role in shaping protections for immigrants' rights in the state of Illinois going forward. Being able to participate in this work was so incredibly fulfilling, and I am leaving my internship more confident than ever that defending civil rights is the type of work I want to pursue going forward in my legal career. I have been so inspired by the incredible attorneys I was lucky enough to work with and learn from this summer.