



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Community Justice Project

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**Update 1:** I just finished my first week as an Equal Justice America fellow and legal intern with Miami's Community Justice Project, Inc.!

As rent and other basic costs continue rising across the country, low-income communities – especially communities of color – face increasing hardship. That's especially true in Miami, my hometown, which was recently named the least affordable place to live in the U.S. (Yes, less affordable than NYC or San Francisco, because average incomes in Miami are significantly lower than in other large cities.)

Community Justice Project, Inc. partners closely with grassroots organizations and social movements in South Florida to provide direct legal services and develop innovative legal and policy solutions to the community's most urgent needs. This summer, I'll work on projects addressing housing, labor, and freedom of assembly issues. I am so grateful to support CJP's important work and learn from the brilliant and committed folks there.

It's no secret that law students and lawyers who do this work make far less than their private-sector peers. Law students can make 6–7x more as a law firm summer associate than they would as an intern at a public interest organization. Equal Justice America provides funded fellowships to make public interest work more economically feasible and expand the pool of talent providing pro bono legal services to individuals and communities that need them most.

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**Update 2:** I'm in the full swing of my internship now, and so far have focused primarily on housing issues. I've jumped into my first legal research memos of the summer in response to requests from our clients, grassroots organizations in South Florida advocating for community members' needs.

Their questions can be boiled down to one: What can we do about the housing crisis gripping Florida?



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While people might debate solutions, the problem is crystal clear: home values and rents across the state have skyrocketed. Since May 2019, average rents in Tampa rose 46%; in Orlando, 26%; and in Miami, 49%. Those rent increases have imposed huge financial stress on working- and middle-class Floridians.

With an eye towards solutions, I've researched the contours of the housing crisis in various Florida metro areas and legal issues related to possible policy measures—including the challenges presented by state laws that hamstring municipalities' and counties' ability to self-govern and solve local problems.

CJP is hard at work to support low-income communities and power-building grassroots organizations. I'm excited to continue my work with them and start attending clinics and local events in South Florida.

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**Update 3:** It's a strange time to be a law student, as constitutional protections and government power to deal with the climate crisis are rolled back at a frightening clip.

Amid the uncertainty, I've found direction in Community Justice Project, Inc.'s approach to public interest legal work. They practice movement lawyering, which centers the needs and visions of organized communities seeking transformative social change.

I'm grateful for my exposure to this practice over the last two weeks. In addition to researching housing law issues around Florida, I've started attending CJP's "office hours" at the Miami Workers Center, an awesome grassroots organization led by Black and brown women building local working-class power. CJP meets with community members and provides legal support on housing, labor, and other issues.

Yesterday, I met a young family of four who immigrated from Central America. They face violent threats back home, uncertain legal status here, and oppressive housing conditions perpetuated by a neglectful landlord, all while trying to make ends meet.

After discussing their issues and legal options, the father expressed that since coming to the U.S., he and his family have felt alone and unsupported—and gave thanks for the support he felt from MWC and CJP.

I'm honored to contribute to CJP's work as it pursues their case and backs the power-building efforts of MWC and other clients.

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**Update 4:** This week was big. I feel humbled by and grateful for the invaluable wisdom I received from so many brilliant minds at the Law for Black Lives Lawyering for Liberation Conference in St. Louis.

Among the most important messages? As a movement lawyer, writing memos and going to court isn't enough. You have to get outside and show up for the community.



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Last Tuesday, my coworkers at Community Justice Project, Inc. and I joined dozens of Miami Workers Center members in their demand for the Miami-Dade County Commission to create and fully fund a right to counsel for tenants in eviction proceedings.

Tenants in Florida have few legal protections despite (1) housing being a human right and (2) the existence of a statewide housing crisis. Where landlords already hold the keys to housing, they hold another big advantage: disparate access to counsel in eviction proceedings. About 90% of landlords in Miami-Dade hire lawyers in eviction cases, whereas just 2% of tenants end up doing so.

But in jurisdictions with a right to housing counsel, represented tenants are able to stay in their homes 67–84% of the time.

MWC members testified about their housing struggles and the urgent need for public housing lawyers alongside longer-term solutions. Without a right to counsel, evictions and homelessness in Miami-Dade—and the suffering they entail—will certainly balloon, especially among working-class Black and brown folks. The rally—accompanied by speeches, music and dancing—was a moving demonstration of organizing power. It was an honor to be in solidarity with MWC members and all Miami tenants on the steps of the County Courthouse.

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**Update 5:** It's hard to believe next week is my last as a summer intern with Community Justice Project, Inc. But that doesn't mean the work has stopped!

In the last two weeks, I've shifted from my earlier focus on housing issues to immigration and wage and hour law.

Amid the various problems facing Floridians—historic cost of living increases, inequality, and threats of ecological disaster, to name a few—the state government has instead focused on passing new laws to persecute immigrants, including by threatening private companies, in a play on other recent laws strong-arming the business community. I've helped research these laws, whose impact would be big in Florida, the state with the 4th highest percentage of foreign-born individuals in its population.

I've also researched possible wage theft claims for an individual client whose former boss refused to pay them over \*80\* hours of wages. It was encouraging to learn that Miami-Dade County has a wage theft ordinance that provides remedies far greater than those in state and federal minimum wage law, meaning employees who are fleeced by mismanagement or malice have recourse to get their hard-earned money back—and then some. CJP's work is essential. I've been incredibly grateful to contribute to their efforts in supporting low-income communities of color around Florida, and especially in Miami.

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**Update 6:** My summer with Community Justice Project, Inc. and Equal Justice America has come to an end!



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In my last weeks, I continued my research into a wage theft case impacting a Miami Workers Center member and into Florida's housing crisis. On the latter, my research ended up aiding community organizers' successful campaign to get Orange County to declare a housing state of emergency and place a one-year rent stabilization measure on the November ballot to buy residents time as the County explores longer-term policy solutions that vindicate the human right to housing. Predictably, landlords and real estate special interests have sued Orange County in an effort to continue profiting and handcuff voters' ability to govern themselves. While that plays out in the courts, I'll continue working with CJP to empower Floridians to fight for emergency rent stabilization elsewhere in the state.

What's going on in Orange County is exhilarating: for the first time in nearly 50 years, amidst a historic housing crisis, Floridians are exercising their power under the state's housing laws to rein in rampant profiteering and ensure a more affordable rental market. It's an example of the inherent power of the people and the role movement lawyering can play in helping communities navigate their way through legal systems to defend themselves and achieve greater economic, political, and social security. My work at CJP, attendance at Law for Black Lives's Lawyering for Liberation conference, and participation in a Law, Organizing, and Power Building workshop have opened my eyes to the tremendous promise and necessity of organizing for social justice and lawyers' role in that struggle. I know now that I want to be a movement lawyer, and that I have a strong interest in using my legal skills to fight for housing justice and democracy reform.

I'm incredibly grateful for my experiences this summer and how much I feel I've grown from them. I'm thankful to have met and befriended so many bright, committed, inspiring people along the way, from my fellow interns and the staff at CJP, to the organizers and community members in Florida and New York who are daily pushing for a better, more humane future.

The financial support I received from Equal Justice America made my work and that of other public interest law students more economically feasible. As the cost of living increases—and funding for public interest work, particularly while in law school, lags behind—the efforts of organizations like EJA to level the professional playing field to increase access to justice become all the more important. Adequately funding direct services work, particularly when paired with a power-building strategy, is essential, even if it isn't always the flashiest legal work.