



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I'm so grateful to receive funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal work with New York Legal Assistance Group in their Domestic Violence Law Unit over the summer.

For most survivors, the justice system can be intimidating, confusing, and inaccessible. It's such a pleasure to help create more ease of access for survivors in poverty. The last several weeks I've learned so much about supporting survivors' needs related to family offense petitions, divorce, custody, and immigration.

I look forward to continuing to identify structural changes that can be made at a policy level to ensure survivors' safety and access to justice.

Equal Justice America is a nonprofit that helps fund law students working with vulnerable citizens and people in poverty—increasing the number of future lawyers who have experience doing public interest work and ensuring everyone has access to justice.

Update 2: Like many of us, I've felt overwhelmed by the Dobbs decision and the lifelong physical, emotional, and economic impacts it has. In researching custody cases this week, I'm reminded of the difficulties that limiting reproductive freedom presents for domestic violence survivors. Forcing birth means that survivors may never truly be free from the man who abused and impregnated them.

Despite this being LinkedIn, I'm not going to sanitize my language here for the sake of professionalism. There's an honesty in explicitness and survivors don't get the luxury of a sanitized experience of violence.

Reproductive coercion is a common tactic abusers use to control their partners. This might look like controlling someone's access to contraceptives, sabotaging birth control methods, "stealthing," agreeing to pull out then failing to, or lying about having a vasectomy or other contraceptive use. Relationship violence commonly includes a disregard for bodily autonomy, boundaries or consent. Experiences of sexual assault and rape are common—including complicated and coercive decisions people make to survive such as ending episodes of physical violence through "makeup sex".

In addition, the impact of trauma makes lapses in healthcare visits, or birth control coverage common.



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People who are impregnated under these circumstances will likely face years trying to find safety, since many abusive partners continue to threaten, stalk, and commit violence post-separation.

In addition, they will spend years of their life in custody litigation. Survivors have to spend so much time and resources defending their custody against an abusive partner who has no factual history of an attempt at parenting but uses custody as a form of litigation abuse. Or they'll spend years trying to convince the courts that the man who sexually assaulted them is incapable of being safe around children. Or they'll have to request from the courts again and again to enforce parenting time, visitation, or intervention when an abusive partner absconds with the child. Or they may be literally required by the courts to stay in the area of the person who makes them feel afraid and has threatened to kill them for the sake of the child maintaining a relationship with that same abusive person.

Our court system has certainly come a long way in understanding the nature of domestic violence in custody cases, but it remains far from perfect and differs jurisdiction by jurisdiction.

Women and people who can be impregnated deserve freedom from harassment, violence, and abuse. They deserve the right to determine their own futures by making their own reproductive health decisions. If that's not a time-tested understanding of what liberty means, I don't know what is.

Update 3: This week I had the opportunity to work with a domestic violence survivor on her U-visa application. It was such an honor to meet her, and it was extra special to me as the first time doing legal work with a client in person.

U-visa is a type of nonimmigrant status for people who cooperate with law enforcement in criminal investigations. Immigrants are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse and protections like this allow people to come forward when they experience or have information about crimes.

Despite the many immigrants contributing to the safety of our communities across the country, only 10K applications are accepted each year, leaving many waiting for protection. As of now, U-visa applications are taking 5-10 years to be reviewed and approved.

I think of this particularly whenever I see news media stories stereotyping and scapegoating immigrants for committing violence. For each of those stories, there are so many immigrants who have risked deportation by coming forward and making our communities safer. Their stories remain invisible while their names inch their way to the top of an achingly slow waitlist.

I hope someday the survivor I met receives her U-visa and also feels seen and recognized for her incredible contributions here.

Update 4: I'm so grateful for all the opportunities I've had to put my new legal skill into practice at New York Legal Assistance Group. This summer I've been able to research legal issues, draft family order petitions and immigration affidavits, interview clients, prepare divorce documents, and support survivors at court.



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My favorite part by far has been working with survivors and seeing the courage resiliency it takes to even engage in the legal process. As my work with NYLAG draws to a close I'm appreciative of all I've learned from the attorneys and clients I've had the chance to work with here.

Update 5: I learned so much during my 10 short weeks with New York Legal Assistance Group. My experience there was a powerful reminder of the importance of access to affordable civil legal services and systems-wide policy protections for survivors of violence.

Many of the cases I had the opportunity to work on were with survivors who had compounding legal issues because of the abuse they experienced. Their abuser damaged their apartment or would show up and be disruptive to other tenants, causing them eviction histories or added expenses. Employers let them go or cut their hours because they had to appear at ongoing criminal court dates, because abusers would show up with threatening behaviors, or because the trauma they experienced impacted their ability to work. Abusers made false reports to ACS, causing unfounded investigations and extensive custody proceedings.

Each of these additional legal issues doesn't even account for abusers' tactics to avoid accountability such as evading arrest or service, or otherwise dragging out legal proceedings.

Getting justice in any of these cases means survivors must invest an incredible amount of time, money, and mental energy. Abusers bank on exhausting those resources by leveraging systems to increase hassle and distress for survivors.

The ripple effect of family violence causes an often-invisible strain throughout our communities. Landlords lose out on otherwise responsible tenants. Employers lose out on competent and trained employees. Protective systems are over-taxed by wading through false claims and litigation abuse.

While access to affordable legal services is essential, it must come in conjunction with policies that can quickly offer protections for survivors in each realm of their lives, so that survivors can remain housed, employed, and parenting while they pursue justice.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to support survivors in their journey throughout this summer. Witnessing first-hand what survivors, particularly those experiencing poverty, must navigate to reach justice and safety has informed my thoughts on how we can expand access and address common challenges at a structural level. As I prepare to study Public Policy at Rutgers Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy this fall, I look forward to learning strategies to formulate policy that supports survivors and decreases family violence's toll on our communities.

Thank you Equal Justice America and NYLAG for helping to ensure people, regardless of their financial circumstances, have equal access to justice.