



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Mobilization for Justice

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**Update 1:** I am a week-and-a-half into my summer internship, and I'm already steeped in the experience of the life of the nonprofit. I'm interning at Mobilization for Justice, a civil legal aid nonprofit in New York City with a number of different practice areas (I'm in their housing rights division). In my first week-and-a-half I've assisted with the drafting of an affirmative action brought by a tenant against a landlord to compel the removal of mold from an apartment, and with the drafting of an advocacy letter written on behalf of a client applying for rent-assistance benefits. I've also begun a research project on what lack of compliance with procedural requirements implies for the rent-regulated status of an apartment building. Day-to-day, I've had numerous opportunities to chat with staff attorneys at the organization and to shadow them as they've made appearances, both virtual and in-person, in housing court; I've also attended a number of trainings and informational meetings at the organization on everything from Right to Counsel in New York City to the basics of class action suits. Throughout it all, I've had a strong sense of the vital importance of the work being done here: seeing staff attorneys make court appearances in cases in which they're trying to prevent families with young children from being evicted from their homes and forced into the city's shelter system is a powerful thing.

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**Update 2:** I feel as though I'm in the full swing of work with Mobilization for Justice. I have a good number of ongoing projects now, each of which involves the development of its own set of skills or body of knowledge. I've had chances so far to work on everything from actions brought by tenants against landlords to compel them to correct housing code violations like mold to drafting advocacy letters on behalf of clients who are applying for public assistance to legal research on topics like the warranty of habitability in housing contracts, source-of-income discrimination, and the intricacies of rent stabilization in New York City. I feel like I'm in a good rhythm and learning more every day. Throughout it all, I've felt incredibly privileged to work for an organization that has the team of lawyers and support staff that it does. The culture here impresses me. I love the experience of passing by colleagues who are chatting about some legal problem and laughing on my way to my workstation.



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**Update 3:** This week I submitted a draft of one of the larger assignments that I've been given since starting the internship: a research memo on a discrete issue surrounding rent stabilization in New York City, and the regulations with which landlords renting out rent-stabilized units have to comply. The memo has been an amazing experience: I got the real feeling of working on an unsolved intellectual problem. And I actually have a small hope that my research might be of some use to the nonprofit at some point, at least as a foundation on which a staff attorney confronting a real-world instance of the problems I investigated might build. It's been very rewarding, and engaging, all the more so as rent stabilization and regulation are issues about which I feel passionately. I believe very strongly in governments regulating the price of basic necessities like housing, and the chance to work on rent regulation in the city was extremely gratifying. I also had an in-person meeting with a client and conducted a full client intake with a monolingual Spanish speaker, through the help of a service that provides interpreters. It has been a very full week, the sixth of the internship. It's crazy to think that it's now more than half over.

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**Update 4:** My internship is now in the home stretch, with approximately three weeks remaining. It's amazing how the time has flown by. I'm going through a mix of sensations: satisfaction at the completion or continuation of long-term projects; gladness at the opportunities that still present themselves to hop onto new work; a sense of place and at-homeness in the internship that has come over time. A slight hiccup in this past week (a COVID diagnosis and some consequent working from home) didn't dampen my enjoyment in things even if it took me away from the office.

I'll round off this EJA update by simply narrating some research by which I've been engrossed for the past couple of weeks: research on evidentiary matters for a Braschi succession case. Braschi succession refers to the doctrine in New York state under which nontraditional family members may succeed to the property rights of decedents; the name comes from the 1989 New York Court of Appeals case *Braschi v. Stahl Associates Co.*, in which Miguel Braschi, the long-term partner of Leslie Blanchard, succeeded to the tenancy of the latter's rent-controlled apartment. The evidentiary issues have been fascinating, and the substantive work feels deeply meaningful.

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**Update 5:** Now that my internship is at an end, taking stock of the area of legal practice in which I spent my summer, my impression of the situation in New York City for low-income housing was, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite discouraging in many ways. Interning in Mobilization for Justice's Housing Rights division during the summer of 2022, as pandemic-era protections for renters and tenants were first beginning to relax, I saw firsthand as the machinery of eviction was beginning to resume normal operations in the city. It was a prospect of deep injustice, one that starkly illustrated the power disparities in the system between renters and landlords, and the endemic racial segregation (and racial wealth and income gap) that exists in New York City. I didn't work on the case of a single white client in the Bronx office of the nonprofit.



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All of this was all the more remarkable in that Mobilization for Justice was only one nonprofit managing one part of the stream of tenant cases in need of legal representation and was moreover one of the unionized ones where the attorneys had case caps, and as such would never be representing more than a certain number of clients. Working in a unionized legal workplace was one of the aspects of my experience for which I was most grateful: I felt that I could discern the positive impact of unionization on the social aspect of the work, and the absolute necessity of case caps for optimizing client outcomes (having attorneys with humane workloads that permitted genuine attention and engagement) was made manifestly clear to me.

This was just one of the many reasons that, in spite of all of the challenges and injustices I witnessed in the housing court system, I managed to feel profound hope in what I saw this summer, mostly because of the incredible work I was privileged to witness from the attorneys on staff at Mobilization for Justice. My personal experience there felt like an optimal version of an internship, inasmuch as I frequently had the thought, while doing the work of the internship, “yes, I could very much see myself doing this sort of work for a living.” I had exposure to a broad range of legal tasks, from client interaction to clerical work to all manner of research and writing activities, all within the guardrails of the friendly expertise of the staff attorneys for whom I worked. I’d choose to intern there again in a heartbeat.