



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Harvard Legal Aid Bureau

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**Update 1:** I just finished my first month at the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau, a student-run civil legal aid organization which provides free legal representation to marginalized and low-income communities in the Boston and Greater Boston area. Within HLAB I find myself in the Family Law Unit working with survivors of domestic violence on legal matters such as preventative orders, divorces, paternity, child support, and child custody issues. While the area of law and organization might be new to me, the passion for service is not. I have committed my professional and educational career to providing a voice for marginalized and underserved communities.

After a few weeks of trainings and exploring a new subject matter, I find that what has taught me the most are my clients. Their strength and resilience drive and inspires my work on a daily basis. My clients are the reason I challenge myself to be a better student attorney and represent them in the way that respects their stories and backgrounds.

I could not have taken on this incredible opportunity if it were not for the Equal Justice America Legal Services Fellowship supporting students like myself in following their passion to serve. I am looking forward to the rest of my summer at the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau seeing what I can achieve for my clients.



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**Update 2:** As the month of June comes to a close, I find myself already dreading the end of my summer experience at HLAB. This experience has been so rewarding I cannot imagine it coming to an end. In June alone I was able to be more confident in my writing, my communication, and my ability to make a difference. But perhaps the most significant stride in June was my ability to connect with my clients. Swooping in during the summer and activating as temporary counsel can be a difficult starting place with clients. My clients must trust me enough to share their needs and goals. But many of my clients do not always vocalize their needs, often because they do not view themselves as worthy. Taking the time to get to know them, their lives, their values, and their goals helped me to be a better advocate. I cannot reach the desired outcome myself by writing a



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persuasive brief or calling opposing Counsel. But together with my client their goals can be properly advocated for, and their voice can finally be heard. I love experiencing the relationship between client and counsel grow as we find commonalities, begin to trust each other, and both contribute to a new goal.

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**Update 3:** One of my greatest fears before starting my summer at the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau was how I would relate to my clients and if I would be able to help them. It was difficult to step in mid-case and get to know my clients while also assisting them at the pace they had grown accustomed to. But that's the beauty of family law, there is always some way to connect to your client. While family law deals with some very heavy topics and issue areas, there are also so many moments most anyone can relate to. We are all human and we all have a family, whether they be biological or chosen. I found it easier to connect with my clients when I shed my over professional exterior and listened to them and shared who I am as a person, and not as a student attorney. That small change has made a huge difference in client communication and trust. Once I could be myself, I could also see my clients for who they really were, the brave, determined, resilient individuals they are. As communication and trust were built, I was able to better understand their goals which helped us work together as a team to prepare for hearings, strategize before trial, find housing options, and negotiate settlements. One of my biggest takeaways from the summer is that student attorneys can help and make a positive impact in their client's lives.

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**Update 4:** As the summer comes to an end, so does one of the biggest cases of my internship. When I first opened the file for the case, I was overwhelmed by its complexities. I thought for sure there must be someone better equipped to handle this. However, as I read through the documents, began to understand the legal standards, and meet the client, the case soon became one of my favorites.

The client was always a pleasure to work with. Her ability to smile and laugh through the most unfortunate circumstances was inspiring. Her strength and endurance were on full display as she shared highly emotional and personal stories.

The legal issues in this case included removal, child custody, divorce, travel visas, personal finance, immigration, and domestic abuse. However, what really made this case different and even more challenging than my others, was that this case was headed to trial. The legal battle had been going on for over two years and neither party could reach a resolution.

The idea of a trial terrified me. I loved taking evidence and trial advocacy, but now my performance was going to affect a real client. A client who deserved the justice she had been denied time and time again. Week after week I gathered information from the client, researched, interviewed potential witnesses, engaged in discovery, drafted direct and cross examinations, communicated with opposing counsel, and prepared the client.

Through every part of the process the client's needs and goals were constantly at the forefront of my mind. When it became increasingly clear that my clients' goals could not be achieved through trial, we switched gears towards settlement. There were countless negotiation calls, messages, and meetings, and dozens of proposed agreements passed back and forth between counsel. As trial date got closer, we prepared more and negotiated more. Right before the trial the parties were able to successfully reach an agreement.



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After signing the agreement, my client was able to walk out of the courtroom with her head held high, her goals achieved, her dignity protected, and her signature smile on her face. Sometimes being a zealous advocate for your client is not arguing in a courtroom, its understanding what your client needs and how to best achieve it. But it never hurts to fully prepare for trial, just in case....

Because of Equal Justice America funding, legal aid organizations like Harvard Legal Aid Bureau are able to hire law students to be those zealous advocates that clients deserve.

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**Update 5:** My Equal Justice America Fellowship has officially come to an end. Everything about this experience from my colleagues, clinical instructors, clients, and caseload has been incredible! I had to push myself each and every day to step out of my comfort zone. I went into this experience thinking I would learn about client communication, case management, family law, evidence, and trial practice. And I did learn each of those things in an exciting hands-on way. However, I learned so much more than that. I learned the ability to bond with clients, how to use my compassion to achieve legal goals, and how to be a fierce advocate for my clients. The environment that allowed me to strive this summer was created by the amazing clinical instructors and colleagues at HLAB.

The clinical instructors took the time to teach me in a hands on and supportive way, feeding my natural curiosity. They let me take the lead on all of my cases while offering support, advice, and encouragement along the way. In the moments they did lead, it was a pleasure to watch them practice and it undoubtedly gave me something to aspire to

As for my colleagues, they were the support system I needed while I built the confidence to practice. We were together for everything including trainings, lunches, strategic meetings, and after work activities. We embarked on this journey together and encouraged each other throughout the entire experience. I was inspired and motivated by how hard everyone worked and how their passion and determination never wavered. Their support and friendship made this challenging summer so much fun.

The work I got to do this summer was so far outside the scope of what is done in the classroom. I had the opportunity to prepare for a trial, negotiate a settlement, stand in court, draft motions, manage a caseload, connect with clients, and communicate with opposing clients. With each task both my level of comfort and understanding grew. I got my first real experience of what it's like to be a lawyer!

Ultimately this summer I am walking away with amazing new friends, a new skillset, my identity as a lawyer, my strengths in practice, and an increased passion to serve.