



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Justin Holiman

**Law School:** The University of Chicago

**Organization:** Legal Aid Chicago

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**Update 1:** It's time for my first EJA Fellow Update! My first two weeks with the Housing Practice Group of Legal Aid Chicago have been excellent. Every member of the HPG has been incredibly welcoming as I transitioned from student to intern. The best part of the internship so far has been meeting all the wonderful attorneys that are clearly devoted to protecting tenants' rights and working to improve their quality of life. My supervisors have been so patient and encouraging as I have begun navigating the many intricate aspects of housing advocacy.

Fortunately, I have a great background in the Housing Practice Group's work thanks to the Poverty and Housing Law Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School. With the support of my supervisors and my clinical work, my introduction into poverty law has been very smooth. From the first day, I have been asked to work on complex research memos and substantive motions with incredibly high stakes for our clients. In my two short weeks, I have a newfound appreciation for the work Legal Aid Chicago does for Chicagoans and am very happy to be able to contribute to ensuring due process for every tenant in Chicago.

I am also very grateful to Equal Justice America for helping to partly fund my summer internship. As a public interest-focused law student, the support of organizations like Equal Justice America enables me to assist those in need.

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**Update 2:** I've now reached the halfway point of my summer internship with Legal Aid Chicago sponsored by Equal Justice America, and it's time for another EJA Fellow Update! One of my favorite aspects of working in the Housing Practice Group is the wide variety of issues that I get to work on, even within a single case. No housing case is simple, and many of them require me to apply the knowledge I have gained from a plethora of law school classes such as civil procedure, contracts, constitutional law, fair housing, and administrative law.

Over the past two weeks, I have been working on more substantive matters including researching and drafting motions to dismiss, motions to strike, and even discovery requests and responses. I am also hoping to argue a motion to seal eviction records in the coming weeks using my Illinois Supreme Court Rule 711 license. Each of these tasks requires a thorough evaluation of the issues and multi-faceted approach to ensure our clients receive high-quality representation.

Understanding how each of these distinct areas of law interact has been an excellent way for me to learn what a



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career in housing advocacy would be like. After five weeks, I can honestly say that I would love to keep helping low-income tenants avoid wrongful eviction. The chance to continue improving their lives is something I hope to pursue for years to come.

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**Update 3:** Last week, I had the unique opportunity to help a client avoid both eviction and any litigation at all. A housing subsidy provider had terminated our client's housing subsidy over the actions of a third-party without any legitimate legal basis. As a result, our client was served an eviction notice.

My team in the Housing Practice Group of Legal Aid Chicago sent a comprehensive demand letter to the subsidy provider, explaining the impropriety of their actions, and demanding they reinstate our client's subsidy. The letter laid out the problems with their decision and the legal bases for the defense we would pursue. Although we fully expected to have to litigate to resolve the claim, in a truly rare outcome, the subsidy provider relented and agreed to reinstate our client's subsidy. This unusual, voluntary reversal by the subsidy provider was a complete victory for our client.

My team was ecstatic for our client! The experience also demonstrated the importance of counsel for low-income tenants at all stages of an eviction proceeding. What could have ended in an eviction, or at the very least, a lengthy court battle, instead ended in a quick victory for our client.

Thanks to the funding provided by Equal Justice America, I was able to celebrate an encouraging win with my team as we ensured our client was able to keep their home.

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**Update 4:** For my fourth EJA Fellow Update, I am very excited to share that I was able to use my Illinois Supreme Court Rule 711 license this week to help a client seal an old eviction record!

Few people know how damaging the mere filing of an eviction order can be for a tenant's ability to find housing. Even if the eviction action is later successfully opposed by the tenant, their leasing record still shows that an eviction action was filed without any explanation of what happened afterward. As a result, landlords will often reject a tenant's application based solely off this fact, especially if the tenant is low-income or doesn't know it is possible to have it sealed.

Therefore, getting an old eviction record sealed can mean the difference between homelessness and safe housing for thousands of tenants across the country. I was able to appear in court this week, alongside my supervisor, to present our motion to have our client's erroneous eviction record sealed. Fortunately, opposing counsel agreed to the motion and we could help our client pursue better housing.

Actually appearing in front of a judge on behalf of a client who is relying on your representation to secure safe housing is a very different and nerve-wracking experience from discussing it in the law school classroom. I am grateful to Legal Aid Chicago's Housing Practice Group for trusting me to represent the organization and our client on this matter. I am also thankful for such an invaluable learning opportunity!

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**Update 5:** I cannot believe my summer internship with Legal Aid Chicago's Housing Practice Group has come to an end! For my final EJA Fellow Update, I have been asked to reflect on my summer experience and what I will take with me into my legal career.



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This summer involved some of the most challenging legal work I have been asked to perform in my (brief) legal career. The work was not necessarily challenging because it was conceptually difficult (though that was certainly the case at times!), but because the legal system is thoroughly weighted against low-income tenants' fight to retain their homes. During my ten weeks in the HPG, I observed housing court judges demonstrate a clear favoritism for landlords' attorneys. Whether it was showing no qualms with opposing counsel Zooming into eviction proceedings wearing exercise clothes in their car to repeatedly cutting us off to hear what the opposite side had to say, it was an uphill battle from the start.

Yet, that adversity also revealed how important Legal Aid's work is to keeping tenants in their homes. The unique benefit of working in the HPG is that we only represent clients who have a valid case for avoiding eviction. Many of our clients lost their jobs during the pandemic or are preoccupied taking care of loved ones who suffered permanent disabilities because of COVID-19. Working to keep them in their homes was thus something our team took seriously.

My favorite tasks involved drafting demand letters and motions for summary judgment to minimize our clients' court time as they worked to find employment or take care of their family. For example, a particularly rewarding task was researching and drafting a demand letter for a client who was being evicted from their new home based on the actions of an abusive ex-partner who was illegally residing at our client's old apartment. While this should never have warranted an eviction action in the first place, our demand letter proved so compelling that the opposing counsel voluntarily dismissed the case. Our team was delighted to share the news and celebrate with our client!

Besides the work, I was able to develop a close relationship with my team members. My supervisor, Kate Polk, is an incredible tenants' advocate (and truly wonderful person) who made it her priority to help me grow as an attorney while trusting me with substantive motions and briefs. Her faith in my work product was inspiring and allowed me to further develop the type of legal instincts I now recognize as crucial to public interest work.

Finally, I will take two key lessons with me in my career. First, I will try my best to listen empathetically to clients to help them feel heard and to ensure my representation is closely aligned with their goals. Second, I will never hesitate to ask my supervisors for feedback (as frank as it sometimes may be). Listening to the people I am helping and the people who are there to help me are dual goals I will pursue throughout my career.