



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Law School:** University of Virginia

**Organization:** Legal Services of Northern Virginia

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**Update 1:** Having just finished my first year of law school, I am excited to be spending this summer working with Legal Services of Northern Virginia as an Equal Justice America Fellow.

Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV) is the largest legal aid organization in Virginia, helping thousands of clients each year in civil legal matters. As a summer law clerk, I get to support staff attorneys in providing legal assistance to indigent clients in Alexandria, VA. Through this, I will be learning and working on housing law, family law, elder law, and public benefits matters in state court.

80% of those living in poverty who require civil legal services don't have access to it. The work LSNV does is vital for providing access to justice for these individuals and communities. Equal Justice America (EJA) provides opportunities for law students like me to work with legal aid organizations like LSNV that provide services to those most in need. This support is crucial in ensuring that law students can continue to be trained in and provide support to this important area of law.

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**Update 2:** Hi all! As many of you know, this summer I am working at Legal Services of Northern Virginia as an Equal Justice America Fellow.

The first month of my internship has been great! I've already had the opportunity to learn about many areas of law, including housing, family, and elder law. This week I'm working on my very own guardianship case-meeting with the client, drafting the pleadings, and filing them in court (with the guidance and approval of a real attorney of course!). I'm also enjoying working on developing training materials for a Courthouse Navigators program in Northern Virginia, which would teach non-legal volunteers ways that they can assist tenants in representing themselves in eviction cases in court. This is really important work since 90% of tenants lack legal representation in housing court (compared to landlords, who only lack legal representation 10% of the time). Navigating the complexities of the legal system can be really challenging for unrepresented tenants, and a courthouse navigator program can really help close this gap.



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**Update 3:** The summer has flown by! I'm still working as a summer law clerk with Legal Service of Northern Virginia, providing free legal assistance to indigent clients in the Alexandria, VA area. The highlight of the last couple weeks has been getting to go to outreach at the local courthouse. This is where we assist people as they are going in for eviction hearings, providing last minute legal information and support before they go before the judge. It's so rewarding getting to interact with clients directly and provide support during such a stressful time in people's lives. Many tenants are even eligible to sign up for services provided by the lawyers at LSNV so they can be represented in their next court appearance! This week, I was also able to fill out expungement forms for multiple tenants so that their past evictions can be deleted from their records, and it will be easier to get approved for future housing. From outreach to drafting pleadings to staff meetings, my work at LSNV this summer has been incredibly rewarding and I'm so lucky that it is made possible by funding from Equal Justice America.

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**Update 4:** My summer internship is coming close to an end. This past week, I got to participate in Legal Services of Northern Virginia's annual law clerk mock trial. We were teamed up in pairs and assigned to be either the petitioner or respondent in a protective order scenario that was created by the attorneys at the organization.

We learned all about trial and witness preparation, prepared opening and closing statements, direct and cross examined witnesses, and got an early lesson in evidence. The mock trial happened in the general district court in front of a real judge who gave us plenty of helpful feedback, and my partner and I even won our case! It was a great experience to learn about the litigation process and further develop our skills in this important area of law. I now feel much more confident working on family law and domestic abuse cases, and I'm looking forward to hopefully applying what I've learned in the future.

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**Update 5:** My summer internship at Legal Services of Northern Virginia came to an end a couple of weeks ago, and I am so glad that I was able to spend the past 10 weeks working with such an amazing organization. I learned a lot about the legal system and various areas of law this summer. At LSNV I worked on eviction cases, uncontested divorce and guardianship cases, protective order cases, and so much more. I was able to see the litigation process play out in real time. I got to help with case research, drafting pleadings, and even going to court and observing what it is like to represent a client in front of a judge. It was great getting to see my coursework come to life in a real courtroom.

I gained valuable litigation experience throughout the summer, but most importantly I gained a new perspective on our legal system and what it is like to try to navigate it as a low-income individual. Things as simple as name changes and divorce agreements require complicated legal documents full of confusing language that must be filed correctly in court following a system of rules that even attorneys can have difficulty navigating. Receiving eviction notices taped to your door can lead to days spent in a courtroom waiting hours to hear your name



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called and to have to defend yourself against a seasoned attorney on your landlord's side. Often the case lasts less than one minute, and the judge and landlord's attorney have spent the entire time having a conversation in legal jargon that no average person would be able to understand. You leave unsure of next steps or if you even have a home to return to that night. The legal system can be near impossible to navigate without an attorney on your side, and unfortunately the majority of low-income Americans have to go through it alone. Legal Aid organizations like LSNV try to lighten this load while helping as many people as they can, but still must turn away nearly half of the individuals seeking their services due to limited resources.

Moving forward, I will take this new perspective and experiences with me as I finish out my last two years of law school and continue to look for ways where I can help expand access to justice for those most in need in our country. Organizations like Equal Justice America raise valuable funds to help make those efforts possible, and it would mean so much to me if you are able to donate and help law students like me continue to spend our summers serving these incredible organizations.