



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: New York Legal Assistance Group

Update #1: Hi friends! This summer, I was selected as a fellow for Equal Justice America, an organization that supports law students working in organizations that deliver civil legal services to those who are most in need. Thanks to the generous support of this organization, I am working at the New York Legal Assistance Group - NYLAG; as part of the fellowship, I'll be providing periodic updates here on some aspects of my work. I've been at NYLAG for about a month now and it's been even better than I had hoped! I've had the opportunity to work on a wide range of matters, but most recently, I've been focused on some of the organization's consumer protection work. The team that I'm working on is bringing litigation against debt collectors who are alleged to have violated federal and state law through unfair and abusive debt collection practices. Through bringing the litigation as a class, we're hoping to get relief for thousands of New Yorkers who have been targeted by these unlawful actions, and stop these practices once and for all. It's been a huge learning curve so far, but immensely rewarding to be able to learn about these issues and support relief efforts for so many others. More to come later this summer.

Update #2: Back with EJA Fellow Update #2! There have been lots of interesting things I've been able to take part in so far this summer, but one experience I won't forget was my recent visit to the Volunteer Lawyer for a Day (VLFD) program. Unlike in criminal cases, when people are sued in civil cases they are typically not provided free representation. As a result, many – and particularly those without means – must represent themselves in cases which may involve complicated legal issues. In debt collection cases, for example, nearly all defendants come to their court appearances without legal representation. By contrast, the plaintiffs in these cases are often represented by attorneys who are experienced in these issues. Through the VLFD program, NYLAG's consumer protection attorneys provide free, short-term representation to those who arrive in court without an attorney and express interest in legal support. Visiting the program, it was clear to me the immense difference that the VLFD attorneys made in these cases. Whether it was through litigating a complex case in front of the judge, negotiating with opposing counsel, or just explaining to a client what was happening in their case, the VLFD attorneys clearly provided necessary support to those who would otherwise be navigating a complex legal process on their own. It was incredible to see these attorneys do this work!



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Update #3: Returning to provide another EJA Fellow Update! In my past updates, I've focused mostly on the consumer protection work I've been able to take part in this summer. But that's really only been one part of the work I've been doing this internship. Over the last several weeks, I've been able to work on a wide array of issues and cases, including immigration, child welfare, healthcare, and more. In addition to these issues, others on my team are working on cases related to labor and education. The breadth of these issues is one of the reasons I was most excited to intern with my team this summer. Because our impact litigation team is housed within a large direct services organization, we're able to serve a broad array of clients, all of whom are facing a wide range of issues. It's been such a wonderful experience being able to support such varied civil justice efforts over the course of the summer – I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to learn about new issues everyday.

Update #4: Back with another #EJAFellowUpdate! This week I want to talk about a recent opportunity I had to do some direct services work. As I've written about previously, the team that I'm working with this summer focuses primarily on impact litigation. In that work, I've had the opportunity to support cases that have the potential to help thousands of individuals. However, it's typical in these kinds of cases to have less direct interactions with the clients you're advocating on behalf of, partly because there are so many of them. More recently, however, I was able to help out with NYLAG's federal student loan hotline, which provides information to borrowers about potential avenues for their loans to be "discharged" (essentially canceled). There are multiple different reasons why borrowers can have their federal student loans discharged; for example, the federal government allows people to apply for discharge when they have been deceived by their educational institution, or when a school closes while the student is still trying to finish their degree. It was really rewarding to get the opportunity to provide information on these and other discharges, and how to apply for them. I'm so appreciative to have had this opportunity!

Update #5: Back with my fifth and final EJA Fellow Update! It's so hard to believe that my summer with the New York Legal Assistance Group has come to an end. It feels like just yesterday that I was sitting at orientation with the other NYLAG summer interns, excited to start my work this summer.

I feel so grateful for the experience I had this summer. I came into the summer hoping to learn more about impact litigation and the important role it can play in redressing injustice, particularly toward the most vulnerable among us. Through my experience this summer, I learned so much more. I not only saw how the experienced litigators on my team navigated complex legal questions and strategy, but also learned about a wide array of issues including consumer protection, immigration, and child welfare. I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to work at NYLAG this summer and will wholeheartedly recommend the experience to others in the future.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

One of the most important lessons I learned this summer was the importance of grounding impact litigation in conditions and issues on the ground. Before I applied for my internship, when I thought about impact litigation, I typically thought of big, famous cases where lawyers strategically identified cases to use as vehicles for expanding certain rights. Part of why I was so excited about working at NYLAG this summer was the opportunity to see impact litigation operate in a different way. I wanted to understand what it would look like to start with the issues facing ordinary people first, and then build the case from there.

Working at NYLAG, I saw firsthand the benefit of this approach. There are countless legal violations that take place everyday, many of which do not typically make headlines. Those violations deserve redress too. One of the most exciting parts of my work this summer was seeing the attorneys on my team hold the line of these issues and fight on behalf of New Yorkers whose issues might otherwise remain unaddressed. Ultimately, I believe that the model used by the attorneys at NYLAG – where impact litigators work in tandem with attorneys directly serving clients – is a powerful one, and a tool more legal organizations should take note of in the fight for meaningful systemic change.

I am also immensely grateful for the skills I was able to build over this summer. One of the best parts of my internship was the perspective it provided on nearly all aspects of the litigation process. From case development, to discovery, to settlement and more, I learned about the many facets of litigation and the varied skills that are necessary for building a successful overall case. In the process, I had the opportunity to hone my legal research and writing skills, while also seeing what it looked like to think strategically about litigation issues and outcomes for clients.

Perhaps most importantly, I learned that serious litigation can be real fun. The attorneys and interns I worked with this summer were not only some of the smartest, most effective advocates I have had the pleasure of working with, but also some of the kindest and most supportive. Just knowing that I would get to spend time with my team over lunch or coffee made me excited to come into the office. Even when the issues were complex and difficult, the attorneys always took the time to explain what they were doing and why they were doing it. And they always took the opportunity to offer their own experiences and advice to help inform the interns' future decisions. I'm so glad I got to spend this summer with the wonderful attorneys and interns at NYLAG, and I can't wait to see the amazing work they continue to do in the future.

If you'd like to contribute to EJA, the organization that is supporting my fellowship this summer, please consider donating.