

**CIVIL RIGHTS AND
RACIAL JUSTICE
FELLOWSHIP**

**POST GRADUATE
ANNUAL REPORT**

EQUAL JUSTICE
A M E R I C A



**RUBY CHERIAN
EJA FELLOW**

**LEGAL AID
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**CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA
FALL 2024**



I. REFLECTIONS



Ruby Cherian, J.D. 2023
University of Virginia

This report highlights my work during the Equal Justice America (EJA) fellowship at the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) in Richmond, Virginia. Through direct legal services, movement lawyering, and policy advocacy, I focused on advancing systemic change and supporting under-resourced communities. The document summarizes key initiatives, challenges, and successes while reflecting on the broader implications of this work.

The EJA fellowship at LAJC has been transformative, allowing me to contribute meaningfully to systemic change while honing essential skills in litigation, movement lawyering, and policy advocacy. Each project underscored the interconnectedness of legal and social challenges, highlighting the importance of collaborative, community-driven solutions. I am deeply grateful to Equal Justice America for this opportunity and look forward to advancing justice and equity in my ongoing legal career.

This experience also revealed the emotional toll of legal advocacy, particularly when working with incarcerated individuals and trauma survivors. Open discussions about emotional labor and the integration of trauma stewardship principles proved essential in maintaining my well-being and sustaining the energy required for this impactful work.

"I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY AND LOOK FORWARD TO ADVANCING JUSTICE AND EQUITY IN MY ONGOING LEGAL CAREER."



II. INITIATIVES

Advocacy for Incarcerated Individuals: Scott v. Clarke

One of the cornerstone cases I worked on is Scott v. Robinson, a class action lawsuit addressing inadequate medical care at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women (FCCW). Despite a 2015 settlement agreement, compliance issues persist, necessitating ongoing advocacy and status hearings.

One of my responsibilities include visiting Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women monthly to meet with named plaintiffs and other clients, fostering trust and understanding their needs. I also call clients throughout the week. Building relationships with clients and understanding their experiences allowed me to advocate more effectively for their needs while deepening my understanding of the broader implications of prison reform. Lastly, I relay client concerns to the court-appointed compliance monitor through monthly reports.

The ongoing struggle for compliance in this case highlights systemic challenges in ensuring incarcerated individuals receive their constitutional right to adequate medical care. It also highlights the tension between abolition and harm reduction. Class actions regarding prison conditions can cause more funding to be directed to jails and prisons in order to comply with settlement agreements. While the ultimate goal continues to be abolition, we realize that there are people currently suffering in carceral systems that currently need help.

Community Lawyering: The People's Coalition

As part of LAJC's commitment to community lawyering, I collaborated with the People's Coalition on opposing a \$73 million expansion of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail (ACRJ). My responsibilities consisted of doing research, writing talking points, door knocking in the community, helping coordinate bi-weekly meetings,



engaging in direct advocacy with city and county boards, speaking with members of the press, and supporting our Senior Organizer, Harold Folley.

This campaign underscored the importance of redirecting public resources from punitive systems to community-based solutions. By emphasizing the long-term benefits of mental health and social services in the community, we aimed to shift the narrative around public safety and incarceration.

Policy and Legislative Advocacy: Mass Surveillance and Automatic License Plate Readers

In collaboration with the ACLU Virginia and Justice Forward, I spearheaded efforts to address the privacy implications of automatic license plate readers (ALPRs) proposed by the Charlottesville Police Department. ALPRs invade the privacy rights of individuals, aggregating data about people's whereabouts. Our coalition spoke at Charlottesville City Council and wrote a letter against the installation of ALPRs in Charlottesville. We also highlighted the hidden influence of police foundations in funding surveillance projects, shedding light on their role in circumventing oversight. These efforts illustrated how technological advancements can deepen existing disparities and highlighted how a coalition of groups could work together.

My work at the Virginia General Assembly further deepened my understanding of policy and legislative advocacy. Key contributions included helping edit bills, one-pagers, and talking points for proposed legislation, as well as helping to organize a lobby day for the People's Coalition to amplify community voices in policymaking. This experience emphasized the importance of precise legislative language and navigating the tension between incremental reforms and broader transformative goals. A strategy for incremental reforms may be best in a situation where the governor is not favorable and likely to veto bills. Through both initiatives, I gained insights into the complexities of building coalitions, balancing pragmatic and visionary approaches, and fostering



transparency and accountability. Witnessing the interplay between grassroots advocacy and legislative processes underscored the power of community-driven initiatives to influence public policy and drive systemic change.

Assisting with other Campaigns: Expungement

At an expungement clinic in Martinsville, I assisted our expungement attorney Lauren McGarry with filing petitions for 13 clients. Expungement of criminal records removes barriers to housing, employment, and education, fostering second chances. This work emphasized the tangible impact of legal services on individuals' lives and the systemic benefits of reducing criminal record stigma. Many participants expressed relief and hope, as expungement paved the way for new opportunities. The clinic also served as a reminder of the barriers that persist in the justice system and the importance of accessible legal support for underserved populations.

"WITNESSING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY AND LEGISLATIVE PROCESSES UNDERSCORED THE POWER OF COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INITIATIVES TO INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICY AND DRIVE SYSTEMIC CHANGE."

Training

In addition to my work, I had the opportunity to attend trainings, such as the Shriver Center's Community Lawyering training and the Midwest Academy's Organizing for Justice training. These trainings allowed me to gain insights into campaign strategy, methods to foster community-centered leadership, and tools used by organizers, including power mapping and leadership development.

These learnings enhanced my capacity to align legal practice with grassroots activism. The training also provided tools for developing strategies that address root causes of systemic issues rather than merely treating symptoms. By incorporating these approaches, I aim to contribute to sustainable change that empowers marginalized communities.



III. CLIENTS SERVED

In the *Scott v. Robinson* case, I serve as part of the plaintiff's counsel representing a class of over 700 individuals incarcerated at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. This role involves weekly calls, monthly visits, and daily JPays to maintain communication with those interested in discussing their medical care.

Additionally, I am representing an individual in a fines and fees action, petitioning the court to remit excessive court-imposed debt. I am currently finalizing the petition and anticipate filing it soon.

IV. SUCCESSES

One of my successes in the fight against mass surveillance was getting a shorter retention period and a list of ALPR camera locations in Charlottesville. Due to our advocacy in Charlottesville while they considered a pilot ALPR program, the data collected in Charlottesville is only kept for 7 days in the system (rather than the standard 30 days). A list of the locations of the ten cameras was also provided. In most other localities, this information is not provided.

"BEFORE I BEGAN CONDUCTING MONTHLY VISITS, SUCH VISITS WERE IRREGULAR. REGULAR PRESENCE HAS ENSURED THAT CLIENTS RECOGNIZE US AS PLAINTIFF'S COUNSEL, TRUST US MORE, AND REFER OTHERS TO SPEAK WITH US."

One of my key successes in the *Scott v. Robinson* case was establishing a consistent schedule for plaintiff's counsel visits. Before I began conducting monthly visits, such visits were irregular. Regular presence has ensured that clients recognize us as plaintiff's counsel, trust us more, and refer others to speak with us.



Another success involved advocating with the compliance monitor to relocate sick call boxes back into the housing buildings. Previously, FCCW had consolidated sick call boxes into a single outside location, which led to individuals being charged for being in an “unauthorized area” simply for attempting to submit medical request forms. As a result of my advocacy, sick call boxes have been restored to each building, ensuring more accessible and equitable healthcare processes for the incarcerated individuals.

V. CHALLENGES

One challenge I faced was navigating interactions with the press. Media training was not part of my law school experience, and I initially felt unsure about how to handle interviews with reporters. However, with practice, experience, and guidance from my supervisors, I have developed greater confidence in this area.

VI. GOALS FOR THE NEXT HALF YEAR

Over the next six months, I have set three primary goals. First, I plan to attend a trial advocacy training to strengthen my litigation skills. Second, I aim to apply those skills by serving as lead counsel in approximately two cases, representing individuals in our core campaign areas. Lastly, I intend to deepen my connection with impacted communities—beyond the attorney-client relationship—by attending at least five community events in Richmond, Virginia, to ensure their perspectives shape my work.



VII. MEDIA

TV:

- <https://www.wric.com/news/politics/capitol-connection/virginia-lawmakers-looking-to-put-guardrails-on-the-use-of-automatic-license-plate-readers/>
- <https://www.29news.com/2024/04/10/charlottesville-community-members-weigh-privacy-concerns-flock-safety-camera-program/>

Articles:

- <https://www.kbia.org/kbia-news/2024-10-10/civil-liberties-groups-concerned-about-columbias-planned-use-of-traffic-cameras>
- https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/charlottesville-jail-renovation-has-a-big-price-tag-but-little-public-input-critics-say/article_0b784654-c158-11ee-a327-97c39ac10a2c.html
- <https://www.29news.com/2024/02/13/acrj-renovations-nearing-vote-how-it-will-look/>

Legislative Testimony:

- <https://sg001-harmony.sliq.net/00304/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2?fk=15727&viewMode=2> (at 10:48 A.M. mark)



SUPERVISOR EVALUATION

**By Maisie Osteen, Senior Supervising Attorney,
Civil Rights and Racial Justice program, Legal Aid Justice Center**

Ruby Cherian has consistently proven to be an exceptional member of our legal team, contributing significantly to our work with both individual clients and larger systemic advocacy. Over the past year, she has taken on critical roles in numerous cases, policy campaigns, and community efforts, all while demonstrating a deep commitment to justice and equity. Her work exemplifies a combination of legal skill, strategic thinking, and a genuine dedication to serving marginalized communities.

One of Ruby's most notable contributions has been her work on the Scott v. Robinson case, a class action lawsuit addressing inadequate medical care at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. Ruby's involvement in this case has gone beyond traditional legal duties; she has actively built strong relationships with incarcerated clients through regular visits and communication. This approach has fostered trust and a better understanding of their needs, ensuring that their voices are central in the litigation process. Ruby's advocacy in this case led to a significant improvement, namely the restoration of sick call boxes in each housing unit after they were removed by FCCW administration, making healthcare more accessible for incarcerated individuals.

Ruby's ability to work collaboratively with community organizations has also been a significant strength. Her role in the People's Coalition, particularly in opposing the \$73 million expansion of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail, showcased her ability to translate legal expertise into grassroots action. Ruby's work on this campaign ranged from research and writing talking points to engaging with the media and working directly with community members. This campaign was a clear demonstration of Ruby's belief in the power of community-driven solutions, as she worked to shift public discourse away from punitive measures toward a focus on community-based safety and well-being. In addition, Ruby has presented to the People's Coalition on power mapping, on the proliferation of surveillance technologies, and other acute issues facing our community. Ruby approaches community work as a true movement lawyer; with humility and a belief in the power of collective action.

Ruby has also made impressive strides in policy and legislative advocacy. Her work on the issue of Automatic License Plate Readers (ALPRs) in Charlottesville is a prime

example of how she merges legal analysis with public policy. Through her efforts, she helped secure a shorter retention period for ALPR data and ensured transparency about camera locations. This achievement was a direct result of the People Coalition's advocacy which was supported by Ruby's leadership. Her ability to build coalitions, navigate legislative processes, and advocate for privacy protections in a rapidly changing technological landscape has made her an emerging leader in the surveillance technology space in Virginia.

Ruby has shown remarkable initiative in taking advantage of learning opportunities as they arise, whether through shadowing more experienced colleagues, seeking feedback, or proactively participating in training and community engagement. Her ability to quickly absorb new information and apply it to her work demonstrates her commitment to continuous growth. Since CRRJ is a small team, Ruby often takes on diverse and complex responsibilities which she handles this with maturity and dedication. As she continues to grow in her legal career, we are excited to support her as she takes on more leadership roles, particularly in the courtroom, where we are confident that she will thrive with the experience and guidance she has gained.

Looking ahead, Ruby has set clear and ambitious goals for the next evaluation period. She plans to attend trial advocacy training, serve as lead counsel in multiple cases, and strengthen her connections with impacted communities by attending local events. These goals demonstrate her ongoing commitment to professional growth and her desire to make an even greater impact both within our organization and in the broader community.

In her last 18 months at LAJC, Ruby Cherian has been an outstanding member of our CRRJ team, consistently demonstrating a high level of dedication, skill, and compassion in all her work. Her contributions to our ongoing cases and community initiatives have been invaluable, and her commitment to social justice continues to drive her professional development. With continued growth in areas like media engagement and trial advocacy, Ruby will undoubtedly become an even more integral part of our team. We look forward to her continued success and the positive impact she will undoubtedly make in the future.

Overall Rating: Outstanding