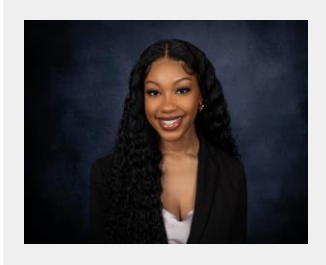




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Assitan Diakite

**Law School:** Albany Law School

**Organization:** Legal Aid Society NYC

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### Update 1:

I am so grateful to Equal Justice America for supporting my work in the Immigration Legal Unit at Legal Aid Society NYC. This summer I will be working on detained and non-detained cases within the unit. There are a variety of cases my supervisors have informed me on already, and I am so eager to start working on them.

These past two weeks, I have received training on numerous topics and issues I may run into while interning in the Civil Division. These include training on the structure of immigration courts, deportability circumstances, DEI initiatives, and even mindfulness practices as public interest work can be demanding on the body and mind.

I look forward to learning more while at Legal Aid Society NYC and directly interacting with clients. One of the things that has drawn me to public interest work is that I am able to have a direct, positive impact on the lives of those around me. That is why I am extremely grateful to Equal Justice America for supporting my work this summer. Without EJA, I would not be able to help the thousands of New Yorkers facing immigration issues.

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### Update 2:

So far, I am enjoying my time at Legal Aid Society NYC, and I owe it all to Equal Justice America for making this internship possible.

These past two weeks I have moved on from training and have applied what I've learned. I had the chance to conduct a client meeting and familiarize myself with new immigration forms that I hadn't used before. This was a great experience because it was a glimpse into what I would be able to do as an actual attorney. In addition, being able to connect with clients was a great feeling. They expressed their gratitude and were truly happy that someone was able to finally help them with their immigration needs.



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I have also conducted extensive research and memos in relation to asylum applications and how hard it is to establish a “particular social group”.

Lastly, I attended two company networking events. This was great because I was able to network and gain connections with people who are working in the same field as me, as well as other law students.

I’m excited to see what these next two weeks have to offer!

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### **Update 3:**

In these past two weeks at Legal Aid Society NYC, I have really been getting used to being in the office, doing immigration work, and the overall office culture. At this point, I truly feel as though I am a part of the office, and not only an intern.

As an intern, the staff makes it a point to include us in team meetings, DEI events, and create opportunities for us to gain knowledge. For example, even though my supervisors did not have any upcoming immigration hearings, they still made a point to reach out to their colleagues to see if they had any hearings I could sit in on.

Additionally, I have been working a lot on country conditions for clients’ asylum applications. My supervisors have trusted me with completing these important tasks and I feel grateful and pleased that they believed in me to complete them.

I’m excited to see what these next two weeks have to offer!

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### **Update 4:**

These past two weeks at Legal Aid Society NYC have been very busy. I have been tasked with completing a client’s VAWA application. This includes legal research, fact investigation, reading through the case notes, meeting with the client, compiling evidence, and also creating declarations for the client and witnesses. This matter is also urgent, so the goal is to get this application completed as soon as possible, while being careful to not make mistakes.

This task has been a bit challenging for me, mainly because of the subject matter and the tough conversations I will eventually have with the client. VAWA applications provide immigration relief for the spouses and/or children of U.S. citizens/green card holders (legal permanent residents) who have been abused by them. The survivors of the abuse have a pathway to getting legal status without the participation of the abuser.

In preparation for these tough conversations with the client, I have created a “script” for our meeting. Preparing questions beforehand seems to be the best way to go about these conversations because I have a chance to



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review the questions multiple times and make sure they are effective at eliciting relevant information, but are also respectful to the client.

Ultimately, the goal is for the client to feel safe, comfortable, and confident about their application. I will try my best to ensure the client feels that way.

I am excited but also nervous. I am nervous because this is my first time handling a VAWA case and I don't want to mess up. I am also excited because I know that I am one step closer to helping the client achieve legal status and relief from things that have happened in the client's past.

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## **Update 5:**

Sadly, this is my last and final update. My experience at Legal Aid Society has been nothing short of amazing. I've been able to fulfill my goals of helping clients, learning new things, and connecting with staff and other interns.

Regarding the VAWA application I mentioned in the last update, due to unforeseen circumstances in the client's life, I was not able to continue working on the application as that was not a priority for the client. However, I was able to work on opening and closing arguments for an upcoming hearing on a different claim the client had. That was my first time ever drafting an opening and closing argument, so it was really exciting for me. Additionally, the fact that I was able to help someone regarding their immigration proceedings and that the lawyer on the case would be repeating my arguments made me feel even better.

Throughout this internship, one of the most important things I learned was to follow the client's lead. One particular client whose file I worked on had multiple claims for relief, and multiple aspects of their asylum application. As an advocate, it is natural for us to want to defend our clients zealously, and to our best ability – which may mean adding different grounds of persecution to an asylum application in an effort to strengthen it. This is what we attempted for a particular client. However, when asked questions regarding the claim, the client shut down a bit. It seemed the conversation was too hard, and just answering the questions was almost like reliving the trauma that had happened to the client.

Although the questions we asked were important towards forming the claim, we didn't push for responses, and eventually, the claim was scrapped. This is when I learned that it is important to follow the client's lead. Although the claim would have bolstered her application because the client was so uncomfortable, it was scrapped. Ultimately the well-being of the client is the most important thing, so retraumatizing the client didn't seem conducive to what we wanted to accomplish. Here, I learned to follow the client and let them dictate what they would like to do with their case, while also informing them of the options they have available to them.