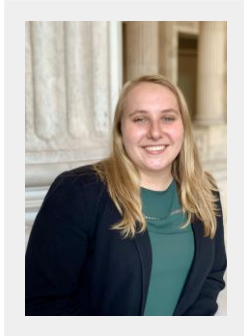




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Jenna Stanwood

**Law School:** American University Washington College of Law

**Organization:** Neighborhood Legal Services Program

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**Update 1:** I am honored to have been selected as an Equal Justice America fellow this summer for my work with the Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP). NLSP provides free civil legal advice and representation to low-income D.C. residents. Though NLSP attorneys practice in a variety of civil law areas, I am working with the Family Law Unit. As a part of my fellowship, I will be posting updates on my work throughout the summer.

98% of petitioners and respondents in the Domestic Violence unit of the DC Superior Court proceed pro se, while 77% of plaintiffs and 98% of respondents in divorce/custody cases also proceed without representation. NLSP is working to close this representation gap. I have only been with NLSP for three weeks, but I have already had the opportunity to work directly with clients and to see up close how much of a difference good representation can make in family court.

Equal Justice America funds law students working with organizations that provide free legal aid across the country. Their work not only helps to increase access to legal services for those in need, but also helps to train future legal aid attorneys. I'm grateful to be a part of their work this summer.

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**Update 2:** I am over a month into my work at Neighborhood Legal Services Program and into my time as an Equal Justice America fellow. During this month, I have been lucky to have the opportunity to sit in on hearings and help to prepare my supervising attorneys for court proceedings. I have learned so much in just a few weeks, and I am so grateful to NLSP's team for providing these opportunities for me.

Most of the cases I have observed have involved a pro se litigant on one side, and I have seen how being able to obtain counsel changes the dynamic in the court room and impacts outcomes for families. I'm so proud to be a part of NLSP's goal to help close the representation gap in civil court.



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Recently, my fellow interns and I participated in Washington Council Of Lawyers' D.C. Superior Court Open House. I joined my fellow intern and EJA fellow Kali Fields and a group of other summer clerks and interns in touring the Domestic Violence Division, where we were walked through the steps a survivor takes to file for a civil protection order and the resources available to them through the court. We were also able to speak to a judge and hear first hand about how complex and emotional domestic violence hearings can be, as well as the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic created for the court and survivors. I am looking forward to learning more about family and domestic violence law in my remaining time with NLSP.



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**Update 3:** In the last two weeks, I've been assigned some interesting research projects in my work at Neighborhood Legal Services Program. I have looked into the role of electronic service in the Superior Court Domestic Relations Branch, the DC child support statute, and the birth certificate registration process. I think most law students would agree that legal research and writing isn't their favorite subject in 1L, so I was surprised to find how much I have enjoyed these projects, and how much they have taught me about the practical side of being a family lawyer.

Recently, I have also had the opportunity to assist with some domestic violence cases. Many of these clients are coming in at the most vulnerable time of their lives, and the amazing attorneys at NLSP are truly a lifeline for them. Navigating the family court system, especially with children involved, can be overwhelming, and I am so proud to be part of a team that is helping to make the process easier.

I'm looking forward to participating in a trauma-informed care training at the end of the month, so I can be better prepared to work with survivors in the future.

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**Update 4:** As my time at Neighborhood Legal Services Program comes to an end, I've been reflecting on everything I have learned and observed this summer. Throughout my internship, I have had the opportunity to attend a number of hearings in court, some for clients and some as an observer. This time in court has taught me about how the role of both judges and attorneys can change depending on the case.

During my orientation at NLSP, I learned that for many of the family law cases NLSP attorneys work on, the



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opposing party is appearing in court without a lawyer. Many of the hearings I attended as an observer featured two unrepresented parties. Of course, unlike in criminal court, parties in civil court are not entitled to representation, and legal assistance is often prohibitively expensive. It has been clear from attending these hearings that presiding over a case without represented parties presents a unique challenge for the Judge. Similarly, having only one lawyer between the parties presents new challenges for the attorney that they would not need to navigate if their opposing party also had legal assistance. A lawyer is an invaluable asset in civil court, and free or low-cost options for representation are a vital resource for DC families.

This summer has shown me the importance of EJA's mission to close the representation gap in civil court. I know that the lessons I have learned at NLSP and as an Equal Justice America Fellow will shape my work throughout my legal career.

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**Update 5:** I finished my internship at Neighborhood Legal Services Program on August 4th, and today is my last EJA Fellow update. I have spent the last few weeks reflecting on everything I learned this summer. I am so grateful to NLSP for giving me the opportunity to work with them and learn from the talented attorneys on the Family Law Unit. I am also grateful that Equal Justice America provided me with the opportunity to connect with a community of students and lawyers committed to public service.

Under the guidance and direction of my supervising attorneys, I was able to actively participate in client meetings and trial preparation. I conducted legal research on a variety of family law issues and drafted letters to clients and motions for the court. Not only did I get the opportunity to learn from the talented attorneys and staff at NLSP, but I also learned so much from the clients I assisted and the judges I observed in court.

I decided to attend law school because I wanted to work in family law to provide assistance to clients who face the all-too-common barriers to accessing representation. Most of the cases I worked on this summer involved unrepresented parties and many more cases in DC have no lawyer involved on either side. In family court, the stakes are incredibly high. The outcome of cases may impact a parent's ability to see their child, a family's ability to meet their financial needs, and in domestic violence situations, the health and safety of family members. The legal system is overwhelming and confusing, and no one should be left to navigate it alone.

However, the reality of legal aid organizations is that they will never be able to assist every person who contacts them. There will always be more clients looking for assistance than there are legal aid attorneys. This has made me so grateful to be a part of EJA's mission to train the next generation of civil legal aid attorneys. I know that my work this summer will make me a more compassionate and competent lawyer in the future.