



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Greater Boston Legal Services CORI & Reentry Project

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**Update 1:** Equal Justice America is a nonprofit that helps fund law students working with organizations that deliver civil legal services to those most in need. I am so grateful to receive funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal work over the summer.

These past few weeks working at Greater Boston Legal Services CORI & Re-entry Project has truly been an eye-opening experience! CORI & Re-entry project helps low-income individuals with CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information) who are shut out of the economy, rejected for housing, and denied other opportunities because of their criminal records.

The past three weeks of working with GBLS, I have learned, and continue to learn, how Reagan's "War on Drugs" policy disproportionately impacted African American individuals and continues to haunt them to this day. All interns at the CORI & Re-entry unit have been reading "How to be Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi. When talking about Reagan's "War on Drugs", Kendi states, "Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people." (pg. 34).

As I am slowly taking on my caseload, I have met a variety of individuals who are trying to change their lives by getting jobs, housing, an education, and volunteer experience, but cannot do so due to their CORI. I look forward to continuing assisting these individuals throughout the summer.

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**Update 2:** This week I attended a rally and hearing for Massachusetts' Prison Moratorium bill (H. 1795 / S.1979).



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Massachusetts has one of the lowest rates of incarcerating women in the country. As of January 1, 2022, the population in MCI-Framingham stood at 179, with more than 20% held in pre-trial detention. However, the state is planning to spend \$50 million to build a new women's prison to replace MCI-Framingham.

At the hearing, I had the opportunity to hear over 20 testimonies from the women who are currently incarcerated at MCI-Framingham. These women do NOT need a \$50 million new prison. Over and over again, I heard these women plead to the legislatures to use this money - or even half of the amount - to invest and support rehabilitation and reentry resources, access to housing, health care, economic opportunity, and other social supports have been shown to reduce incarceration.

The women plead for better educational and rehabilitation systems within the prison. They spoke about how they do not have access to AA programs or domestic violence counseling, resulting in women returning to Framingham after being released. They begged for better health care and food. One woman described Massachusetts' \$50 million prison project as, "putting a bandaid on a wound that needs stitches, just a temporary solution."

After hearing over 20 testimonies from the women incarcerated at Framingham, not a single woman said they needed (or wanted) new prison. Massachusetts should be focusing on building up people, not prisons.

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**Update 3:** Throughout the past couple of weeks of working at Greater Boston Legal Service's CORI & Reentry Project, the most valuable lesson that I have learned is that ordinary people can step up, create change, and make a difference.

The most fulfilling part of working in the CORI & Reentry Project is knowing that my actions at GBLS are making life-altering changes for others.

Below is a note that I received from one of my clients. Like millions of others in the state of Massachusetts, his previous criminal record was holding him back in life. He could not find a well-paying job, could not find housing, and was just "stuck" - still feeling like a "criminal." I spoke with my client numerous times on the phone, listening to his stories, learning about him as a person and his goals in life, and understanding how his mistakes from adolescence were hindering him. This week, I received this note along with the last signed paperwork needed to seal his records. I stopped for a second and took it all in: thankful for the opportunity to meet and get to know my client, thankful for the opportunity to work at GBLS' CORI & Reentry Project this summer, and thankful to make monumental differences in my clients' lives.

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**Update 4:** As my internship with Greater Boston Legal services is coming to an end, I am so grateful for the opportunities to spend my summer in Boston and putting my legal skills into practice. Over the past ten weeks, I have been able to research legal issues regarding statutory interpretation of an expungement statute, draft



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affidavit, petitions, and motions on behalf of clients who seek to seal their criminal record, interview clients, complete case intakes, and so much more!

I am so appreciative to the attorneys in the CORI department who took the time over the past ten weeks to take me under their arms and help me grow as a law student and future attorney!

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**Update 5:** To begin, I would like to first thank Equal Justice America, Greater Boston Legal Services, and the staff at Boston University School of Law's Career Services for helping me secure my ten-week public interest legal internship this summer at Greater Boston Legal Services CORI and Reentry Project.

Public interest work is so important for the Greater Boston community; however, it is widely understaffed. I know that my experience from GBLS this summer has helped me grow into a better, more understanding future-attorney with experiences that I will always remember for the years to come.

During the short, ten weeks that I worked at GBLS this summer, I was able to gain hands-on experience in the legal field. I learned and witnessed first-hand how Reagan's "War on Drugs" policy disproportionately impacted African American individuals, and others, and how it left a detrimental impact on these individuals through their criminal record. These individuals were labeled as "criminals" and were unable to secure housing, jobs, and other opportunities such as volunteering at the children's school. Even if an individual is found "Not Guilty" of a crime or their charges were dismissed, the charges still appear on their criminal record, and when a background check for employment, housing, etc. is run, individuals are being discredited for a crime that they did not commit.

A criminal record should not be a lifetime sentence.

From the beginning, I took on my cases from intake to sealing. I listened to my clients, learned about their stories, their struggles, and their aspirations of moving on from their criminal record. I heard numerous clients cry on the phone from their frustrations with the legal system, but also was able to witness tears of joy after relaying to them that their record will be sealed. For my clients, a clean record meant being able to get a steady paying job to provide for their children; it meant a stress-free job search after finishing their nursing program; it meant being able to move out of a homeless shelter and obtain housing; it meant adopting their grandchildren who were currently in Child Protection Service's custody; and it meant dozens of other opportunities for my clients that I was able to learn about.

Again, I am so thankful for the opportunity and learning experience from my ten-week internship with Greater Boston Legal Services CORI and Reentry Project.