



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:

**Name:** William Kleisner

**Law School:** Boston University School of Law

**Organization:** Harvard Legal Aid Bureau

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**Update 1:** I'm pleased to share that I have been selected as an Equal Justice America Fellow for this summer after my 1L year at Boston University School of Law. EJA will help support my work as a member of the housing team at Harvard Legal Aid Bureau where I am working alongside other summer counsel and a team of clinical instructors to fight for housing justice and secure housing stability for our clients.

My first weeks have been full of valuable learning experiences such as partaking in client counseling, settlement management, and the Lawyer for the Day program at the Eastern Housing Court in Boston which gave me an in-depth look at what a day in housing court looks like and how many tenants are in need of affordable or pro bono representation but struggle to access it. I'm looking forward to continuing to learn more about housing law through my work this summer and I am grateful to HLAB and EJA for the opportunity!

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**Update 2:** One of my favorite parts of my experience at the Bureau this summer has been working with our community partner, City Life/Vida Urbana. CLVU is a grassroots community organization committed to fighting for racial, social, and economic justice and gender equality by building working-class power. They have been fighting for tenants' rights since the 70s and are a testament to the ability of impassioned individuals to come together, lift each other up, and bring about positive change. As an organizer myself, I know how valuable organizations like City Life are, and seeing the way our office is able to use the law to support their activism efforts is truly a fascinating glimpse into the world of movement lawyering and the way the law and grassroots organizing intersect.

Working with CLVU has also really shown me just how much of a community issue housing is. When one member of a community is treated unjustly without accountability, wider injustice is likely to perpetuate. The same can be said for tenants. It is truly inspiring to see communities from all over Boston support each other and advocate for their neighbors. I'm thankful for the work CLVU does and I think we could all take a page out of their book when it comes to looking out for each other in every community we are a part of, whether that's our neighborhoods, our schools, or our offices.

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**Update 3:** Working in direct services at HLAB this summer has been a fantastic learning experience for me, particularly in client counseling. One of the most important parts of my job this summer has been communicating with my clients to clearly understand their needs and how they would like to approach the case.



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As a legal aid professional, I'm simply a tool for the client to use to assist in navigating the complexities of the legal system. The client has lived the realities of their case every single day since it began and thus knows what is best for them. It is not my job to tell them what they need, it is my job to get them the results that they want. Clearly understanding my clients' goals allows me to develop effective strategies that will result in the best outcomes for them by centering their voices and experience.

Another incredibly important aspect of client counseling has been helping my clients understand the complexities of the legal system. Access to justice barriers do not simply disappear once a client retains counsel. The legal system and court proceedings can be confusing, and ensuring that the client understands where their case is at, what to expect moving forward, and what is expected of them is vital. Setting these levels early on helps foster a mutually beneficial relationship that prevents surprises and promotes proactivity as opposed to reactivity.

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**Update 4:** Working at HLAB this summer has taught me a lot about the importance of expanding the availability of affordable housing. When planning negotiation or litigation strategy with my clients, I always ensure that their needs and goals are at the center of our plan. I often ask my clients if they need to stay in their current housing or if they would be open to moving. Almost all of my clients wish to stay in the current housing arrangements due to the lack of affordable options near their jobs and support networks. For non-subsidized tenants, there's simply not enough availability in their areas that are income accessible and for those with subsidies, waitlists are so long that they would be waiting 5 or 10 years to find a new place. For housing to truly be more equitable and accessible in Boston, we don't simply need to break down the access to justice barriers that force 93% of tenants to represent themselves pro se in their eviction cases, but also develop more affordable housing so tenants have more options and thus more security and stability in their lives.

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**Update 5:** Working at HLAB this summer was truly an incredible experience. I was able to develop valuable legal skills like client counseling and negotiation while developing case strategies that were specifically tailored to my clients' unique needs and goals. I collaborated with incredible attorneys from other legal services organizations and impassioned grassroots community organizers to help advocate for housing justice in courtrooms, communities, and legislative sessions across the Greater Boston Area and Massachusetts as a whole. I learned the importance of centering clients' perspectives and experiences and how it is not our job as attorneys not to tell a client what they need but to be a tool to help them navigate a justice system that can be confusing and, at times, inaccessible. I developed great relationships with my clients characterized by transparent and frequent communication, which helped me advocate for them to the best of my ability and achieve positive results.

My time at HLAB was also a time of professional development. I had never worked in the legal world before and watching the incredible CIs and student attorneys work on their cases taught me a lot about the kind of lawyer I want to be in the future. I saw how passionate, empathetic, hardworking, and thorough those around



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me were and how much this contributed to their incredible work product. To be surrounded by so many individuals committed not just to client service but to broader ideals of justice, equity, and advocacy was enlightening and certainly deepened my commitment to the public interest space.

A massive thank you to the administrators and clinical instructors at HLAB for all of the hard work they put in to keep things running smoothly and to provide such an incredible experience for our summer cohort. They were kind, passionate, and dedicated to not only the Bureau's mission but our success as students, which was apparent in how hard they worked to support us. Finally, I wanted to give a special shout-out to the members of my summer cohort whom I had the pleasure of working with for the past 12 weeks. I learned so much from each and every one of them, and I know they will go on to change peoples' lives for the better as they continue their legal careers. My time at the B was special not just because of the work I did but because of the people I got to do it with. I'm so grateful for this experience and wish everyone who made it so special all the best moving forward!