



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:

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Update 1: The first two weeks of my internship at Promise of Justice Initiative flew by! I am so excited to be a part of the civil litigation team and to learn from the amazing attorneys who are strategizing various civil rights lawsuits. I have been working on two different projects. One is a civil rights lawsuit that is going to trial in the next couple of months, which involves making sure evidence is properly prepared and all the potential legal counter-arguments are well researched and fully developed. Another case is in the very beginning stages of building a lawsuit. This has involved talking to potential class representatives for a class action, taking intake calls, doing investigatory interviews, and developing strategy for a legal argument. Our clients are all currently or formerly incarcerated, so I've also spent a couple of days at the Louisiana State Penitentiary meeting with them. Visiting the prison has been a sobering experience and strengthened my commitment to anti-carceral work. I also appreciate the opportunity to ground the litigation work in client-oriented relationships. It is exciting to me to realize that working for criminal justice can involve a lot of work on the civil litigation side, and that changing the system requires a lot of creative thinking and thoughtful and persistent problem-solving to deconstruct harmful systems.

Update 2: This summer is going by so quickly! At PJI we are working on several different lawsuits, and I've spent a lot of my time working on the initial stages of a potential class action. Although this summer is not focused on direct client services, I really enjoy this aspect of the work because it is about building relationships with clients and understanding the complexity of the carceral system they are trapped in. A lot of them were convicted by non-unanimous juries. The Supreme Court has decided non-unanimous juries to be unconstitutional, but the decision is not retroactive, meaning that a lot of our clients are in a kind of legal limbo as they search for pathways to challenge their convictions. While they are trying to navigate that legal landscape, they are also working with us to develop a civil rights lawsuit to challenge the conditions at the prison. It can be a delicate balance making sure the clients maintain agency over their legal decisions and providing the support we can in the civil rights arena. I've also been able to listen in on some hearings about motions for discovery, which has been fascinating and given me the opportunity to see some amazing attorneys in action in the courtroom.

Update 3: The past two weeks have been really exciting. I was able to visit clients again in person and to meet with others over the phone. Now that we've met several times, I'm beginning to get to know the clients better



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and I feel like they have begun to open up to me. Because of the heat wave, we've heard a lot of stories about how unsafe conditions are for incarcerated people when the temperatures rise. It has illustrated the fact that civil litigation can be a very slow process and it is frustrating not to be able to help our clients in the moment, even though our eventual aim is to change conditions for incarcerated people. Though the heat wave has passed, incarcerated people in Louisiana still suffer under extreme temperatures without air conditioning. The work PJI does is very much both an immediate and ongoing struggle.

I am also working on an in-depth research project looking into recent scholarship around constitutional arguments against incarceration. I am really enjoying the chance to read deeply and get a handle on how scholars are thinking about justice in a shifting legal landscape. In turn, I have been able to bounce ideas around with my supervising attorney and learn from her perspective. Altogether, my client relationships help inform my research and vice versa.

Update 4: The last two weeks have been very challenging. Our partner organization, the Capital Appeals Project, received news that the Louisiana parole board rejected all 56 clemency petitions for their clients on death row. The organization moved quickly to put out statements and to organize a community vigil. Many attorneys had to take on new work while making sure other projects weren't neglected. Meetings have been rescheduled and deadlines are shifting.

In the meantime, I am still taking part in investigative interviews with potential plaintiffs and talking to them about their experiences in incarceration. I've really enjoyed being able to foster those relationships and have been feeling sad about having to leave them soon. I've learned so much about the process of building a class action suit and wish I could stay to see it through.

Update 5: My summer at PJI was wonderful. I was really grateful to work with my supervising attorneys and fellow interns. My supervisors gave me a lot of opportunities to work with clients, undertake interesting research projects, and attend staff meetings, even if they were about projects I wasn't a part of. I learned a lot about federal class action lawsuits, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and about processes for incarcerated people trying to file complaints about prison conditions. I felt that my supervisor was open to giving me new and interesting assignments whenever I asked, and that the team valued my growth as a soon-to-be attorney. I especially enjoyed a summer-long research project about constitutional arguments against incarceration, which involved deep reading of current law review articles and different constitutional arguments about punishment and substantive due process.

I really valued my time visiting incarcerated people. The experience really grounded me in the realities of how isolating, violent, and exploitative prisons are. Building relationships with potential class representatives required learning a lot of people's personal history and creating trust. All in all, the summer was incredibly rewarding and educational.