



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Urban Justice Center

Update 1: I am excited to share that I have been awarded funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal work with Free to Be Youth Project (FYP) at Urban Justice Center.

FYP is dedicated to breaking the cycles of poverty and criminalization that hinder homeless and street-involved youth from living fulfilling lives free from discrimination, abuse, and oppression. By prioritizing low income and homeless LGBTQ+ youth, FYP stands as the sole legal project in the nation that offers direct legal services to this particular group.

In just one week since I began working with FYP, I have had the privilege of assisting clients with a wide range of legal issues, including immigration, wage and employment disputes, and accessing social benefits. Each day, I face the pressing realities that the LGBTQ+ community is going through, as conveyed through the firsthand accounts of our clients. These struggles are further underscored by the disheartening fact that over 70 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been signed into law this year alone. However, amidst these challenges, I draw inspiration and hope from the unwavering determination of those associated with FYP, be it our partner organizations or the individuals we serve.

If FYP's mission resonates with you, I kindly ask that you take a moment to learn our work by following us on instagram (@freetobeyouthproject).

And thank you to Equal Justice America and Cornell Law School for this opportunity.

Update 2: The past month has been festive, as I got to join numerous Pride events as part of the Free to Be Youth Project. Watching LGBTQ youth slide through the roller rink at the heart of Rockefeller Center in their most joyful selves was an unforgettable sight. It was a scene I long to see more often in Seoul—where this year, the city denied the use of a public plaza for the Pride festival. (Nevertheless, the festival committee remained undeterred and secured an alternative venue in the end, leading to a successful celebration.)



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Amid the festivity, it was also a month that at least five LGBTQ individuals seeking asylum reached out to the Free to Be Youth Project. Having survived persecution in their home countries, they took on a long and, for some, perilous journey to the United States in search of hope. The reality of asylum-seeking is harsh—with its multi-year process and demand that far outstrips the legal capacity in NYC. Despite these hard circumstances, I did my best to at least accompany them at the outset of their journey of realizing their hopes. One of the clients, after an initial interview where he had to share his most intimate traumas to a stranger, thanked me just for my willingness to listen to his story. His words were a reminder that sometimes our act of listening can itself be an impactful thing to do. Further, this experience has strengthened my determination to equip myself with the necessary legal tools, which will enable me to do much more than listen and make more substantial changes.

Update 3: Many Free to Be Youth Project clients reach out to us seeking to solve a single issue they believe requires the help of a lawyer. Our process begins with an intake interview, focusing on this specific problem. But as the conversation evolves, we often reveal additional legal complications or, in some cases, entirely new legal issues. These newly-discovered issues often proved to be more urgent than the problem initially brought forth.

This scenario is particularly prevalent among our clientele—low-income/homeless LGBTQ youth—who can be susceptible in many aspects of their lives. A client seeking help for a traffic ticket might also be struggling with other concurrent problems. They might be unaware of their eligibility for certain public benefits, or perhaps they may have an outstanding warrant they were unsure how to respond to.

Throughout my interactions with our clients, I have come to understand one value a lawyer can bring to the table: the ability to shed light on the issues that the client had not even perceived as legal issues. To achieve this, a lawyer must remain attuned to every word the client shares, as it could potentially lead to underlying legal challenges. And further, I've learned the importance of prioritizing these issues in a clear and emphatic manner to ensure the client doesn't feel overwhelmed.

I am thankful to Equal Justice America, Urban Justice Center, and Cornell Law School for allowing me the opportunity to learn these lessons and grow professionally this Summer.

Update 4: The Free to Be Youth Project had been closed for two years and reopened only a few months before I joined. Given the restart, much of our effort was invested in restoring and strengthening our relationships with our partner organizations.

Two of our most critical partners are the Streetwork Project of Safe Horizon and the Ali Forney Center. The Streetwork Project works with homeless and street-involved youth, guiding them towards stability, while the Ali Forney Center pursues a similar objective, with its services focused on LGBTQ youth.



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Over the summer, I have led the intake procedures for both new and returning clients at their drop-in centers. The existence of these centers is vital; they not only direct clients who need legal assistance to our project but also serve as a safety net, preventing these clients from slipping through the cracks during the lengthy and often challenging process of solving legal issues. It takes courage to stand up for one's rights for anyone, not just our clients. I've come to realize that the Streetwork Project and the Ali Forney Center play a pivotal role in fostering this courage by providing a safe space and supportive community for our clients.

I am deeply appreciative for the opportunity to experience firsthand the remarkable work these organizations do and the collaboration that binds them.

Update 5: As a legal intern, I provided direct legal services to LGBTQ+ youth across a range of issues, including asylum applications, public benefits, employment discrimination, and criminal dispositions. I worked with eight clients, from the initial intake interview to the resolution of their cases. This role provided me with a rewarding opportunity for personal and professional growth. I learned first-hand the pivotal role of direct community engagement in legal work. Moreover, I had the privilege to widen my perspectives about LGBTQ issues by interacting with clients and partner organizations.

As an international student for whom English is not the first language, I came into law school with an uncertainty about my potential to excel as a lawyer in the U.S. However, my experience this summer has reaffirmed that a successful contribution to a community as a lawyer means more than mere linguistic prowess. It also depends on the ability to empathize with the client and a commitment to lifelong learning. Encountering clients who have suffered gender-based violence or discrimination either domestically or in the U.S., and identifying as LGBTQ+ myself, I was keenly attuned to their hardships. But at the same time, I remained mindful to avoid making premature judgments about their circumstances. Through these personal interactions, I have gained a nuanced understanding of clients' varied responses to their traumatic experiences, allowing me to accommodate their different needs. I am enthusiastic about the challenges and prospects that lie ahead as I continue to advocate for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community as a lawyer.

My vision extends beyond the U.S. borders. In my home country, Korea, acceptance of homosexuality ranks as one of the lowest among OECD countries. To some people, LGBTQ presence is nonexistent, almost a myth. Marriage equality is not even on the agenda, and the military law still includes a sodomy clause. In the absence of an anti-discrimination act, we are subject to widespread hatred. I plan to share my learnings from my experiences in the U.S. with numerous LGBTQ organizations in Korea. Building upon the invaluable insights from my internship at the Urban Justice Center, I aspire to drive a meaningful impact through pro bono initiatives, both in the U.S. and in Korea.