



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP)

Update 1: Recently, I started a position as an intern with the Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP). NLSP provides free civil legal services to the lowest-income DC residents. While NLSP has many practice areas, I work in the Economic Security Unit (ESU). ESU has three primary practices: (1) public benefits, (2) consumer protection, and (3) barriers to employment.

A significant part of the barriers to employment practice at NLSP helps individuals seal eligible criminal records. Despite DC's "Ban the Box" law, which prohibits employers from asking about criminal history before employment offers, individuals with criminal records still face discrimination while trying to secure employment due to a public record of a prior criminal conviction. Last week, I attended a Criminal Record Sealing Clinic at one of DC's public libraries in southwest DC. During this clinic, our team provided legal information and assistance to three individuals trying to navigate DC's criminal record sealing law. In speaking to these individuals, I learned about the adverse effects that a public criminal record can have on someone's personal and professional life, often lasting long beyond the conclusion of any sentence served.

Throughout the rest of the summer, I look forward to meeting with more DC community members in need of free civil legal services and working with my colleagues at NLSP, including two other Equal Justice America (EJA) fellows, Kali and Jenna!

Image Attached:



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Need Help With Criminal Record Sealing?

June 7 - 4:00 PM

Southwest Library
900 Wesley Pl SW

June 9 - 10:30 AM

Parklands-Turner Neighborhood Library
1547 Alabama Ave SE

June 14 - 3:00 PM

Woodridge Neighborhood Library
1801 Hamlin St NE

Lawyers from NLSP will share information about changes to DC's record sealing and expungement law. Attendees will be able to meet with attorneys to discuss how the law applies to them.

Brought to you by Neighborhood Legal Services Program and DC Public Library. For more information, call 202-832-6577 or visit www.dclibrary.org.



Update 2:

Over the last month at my internship with Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), I have had the opportunity to attend numerous trainings hosted by NLSP and other organizations. These trainings have been far-reaching and have covered DC's laws relating to housing, divorce, custody, civil protection orders, criminal record sealing, debt collection, and locally administered public benefits. Although each of these has helped highlight the tools we can leverage on behalf of our clients (or the barriers our clients are up against), my favorite training so far focused on the locally administered public benefits, including TANF, SNAP, and Interim Disability Assistance.

Last semester, I took a course with Professors Peter Edelman and Jessica Rosenbaum called "Income and Public Benefits." This course focused on the historical and political landscape influencing American policies in creating a social safety net for low-income individuals. While this course helped me understand the overarching values and strategies lawmakers have used to develop public benefit programs, the training I completed with NLSP provided a detailed, technical overview of the processes for applying for public benefits, re-certifying



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eligibility, and appealing agency decisions. Both perspectives are critical in understanding the barriers these programs place on low-income individuals—either by the program’s design to execute antiquated policy values or through the tedious processes local agencies have constructed to implement these complicated programs.

Moving forward, I am excited to continue to work as an Equal Justice America fellow alongside NLSP and our clients to access these critically important programs. Additionally, I look forward to continuing my studies of these concepts at the Georgetown University Law Center by serving as a Teaching Assistant with Professors Edelman and Rosenbaum for two courses next year: “Poverty Law and Policy Practicum” and “Income and Public Benefits.”

Update 3:

As I shared in my first EJA Fellow Update, one of the main practices of the Neighborhood Legal Services Program’s Economic Security Unit is sealing criminal records. In doing this work, I have had the opportunity to interview clients, conduct legal research, and draft legal documents such as client advice letters and motions to seal.

While my colleagues and I work hard to assist eligible clients seal their criminal records, we are often unable to help due to the restrictive criminal record-sealing law in the District. Margaret Love of the Collateral Consequences Resource Center put it best when they said, “the restoration laws in the District of Columbia are noteworthy for a remarkable study in contrasts: D.C. has extraordinarily progressive laws in civil areas like voting, employment, housing, and occupational licensing, and among the most regressive laws in the Nation in every category of criminal record relief. . . .” In April, the DC City Council tried to right this wrong by passing the Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022. While their intentions were noble, unfortunately, their efforts came up short as the act is not scheduled to go into effect until 2026 (and some provisions as late as 2029) due to a lack of funding. This has been a huge disappointment for many of our clients who remain ineligible under the old law, but who would be eligible if the Second Chance Act had gone into effect as originally intended this year. Despite this setback, NLSP continues to seek relief on behalf of our clients and help end the stigma that often comes with a criminal record.

Update 4:

Yesterday, I had the opportunity to provide brief legal information to customers with D.C.’s Small Claims Resource Center (SCRC) on behalf of Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP). The SCRC provides legal and procedural information (though not legal advice) to litigants or individuals considering filing claims in the Small Claims Branch of the Superior Court Civil Division, which handles civil claims of \$10,000 or less.

For many, navigating the legal process is foreign and inaccessible. However, the stakes of any given claim can be high, particularly for low-income defendants. The SCRC tries to lessen the barrier to entry for anyone filing a claim and help answer questions as they navigate the process. Unfortunately, far too many individuals go



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unrepresented in civil actions, even though many civil suits can be just as devastating to one's life as some criminal matters where attorneys often are appointed.

While NLSP and other civil legal organizations do their best to help low-income people seeking civil representation, the need is too great for all to be helped without more support for local civil legal services. For this reason, I'm thankful for community leaders like current DC Access to Justice Chair Peter Edelman, current DC Access to Justice Commissioner and NLSP Executive Director Karen A. Newton Cole, former Executive Director of the DC Access to Justice Commission Jessica Rosenbaum, and Equal Justice America.

Update 5:

As we wrap up the summer and head into the semester, I am excited to share my last EJA Fellow Update as an Equal Justice America Fellow.

Over the course of my summer internship at the Neighborhood Legal Services Program, I had the opportunity to work closely with low-income clients throughout Washington, DC. In my work, I completed client intakes to assess client needs and connect clients to our services, assisted attorneys with legal research and writing, and performed community outreach at four library clinics. In each of these experiences, I was constantly reminded of the importance of providing free, direct civil legal services.

NLSP's work is critical in helping clients navigate inaccessible and often unjust systems that place extreme burdens on clients who are the most in danger of food and housing insecurity. Through its services, NLSP can help clients access financial resources through public benefits or limit barriers to obtaining employment. Additionally, our client-centered approach places clients at the forefront and allows them to reclaim agency over their lives, ultimately promoting dignity and self-determination, key components of NLSP's guiding principles. And this work is more important than ever as the legacy of white supremacy and racism continues to negatively affect low-income communities in the District. This is seen most prominently in communities of color, where the historical effects of red-lining have created long-lasting geographic segregation, and ongoing gentrification efforts further this divide.

Although my time at NLSP has ended, I'm excited to continue serving low-income communities this semester as a Student Attorney in Georgetown University Law Center's Health Justice Alliance Clinic. I look forward to bringing what I've learned from my clients and colleagues at NLSP to this work while continuing to advance my lawyering skills and work with DC communities.

Comment:

If you are able and feel so inclined, consider supporting Equal Justice America, which provides funding for students and fellows pursuing work in public interest civil legal services.