



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I believe that when people are willing to work, they should be entitled to the fruits of their labor. No one should have to deal with discrimination, abuse, and wage theft in the workplace, and yet this is the reality for so many low-income workers across the country. The attorneys, paralegals, interns, and staff at Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS) give a voice to these workers and stand up for the workplace rights of all. Joining GBLS' Employment Law Unit as a legal intern has already proven a fulfilling experience, and I'm excited to continue this work for the remainder of this summer. I'm also grateful to receive funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal work with GBLS this summer.

Much of the work I've done so far at GBLS has been at the intersection of immigration and labor. At the beginning of this year, the Department of Homeland Security announced it would consider deferred action for immigrant workers where the workers are victims or witnesses in a labor/workplace dispute and a federal, state, or local labor agency issues a letter of support. This guidance allows us at GBLS to help protect some of our country's most vulnerable workers, many of whom would otherwise remain silent about abuse by their employers due to fears of removal or other immigration-based retaliation. Over the past weeks I've gotten to speak with several immigrant workers about their unique circumstances, and being able to help free them from the threat of retaliation for reporting workplace abuses has been highly fulfilling.

Equal Justice America, the organization partially funding my internship, is a nonprofit that helps fund law students working with vulnerable citizens and people in poverty—increasing the number of future lawyers who have experience doing public interest work and ensuring everyone has access to justice.

Update 2: Over the past few weeks I have gotten to experience the broad range of work that Greater Boston Legal Services' Employment Law Unit does. Aside from direct legal services, GBLS serves the low-income workers of Massachusetts by pushing for better worker protections in the Massachusetts legislature. Yesterday,



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for example, I spent the day at the state house in Boston handing out information and answering questions regarding four bills which will receive hearings next month. All four bills will repair issues in the system of unemployment insurance, making the administration of critical funds more fair, transparent, and accessible. I have seen firsthand the impact unemployment funds can have on our clients, especially at times when arbitrary actions by their employers leave them unable to pay their bills and provide for their families despite having every desire and ability to work.

Update 3: This past week I got to witness firsthand the power (and resource efficiency!) of a demand letter in the context of lost wage cases. My client had taken state-protected medical and maternity leave but was not accepted back at her job after that leave—a violation of state law. Instead of filing a complaint or lawsuit right away, we sent a letter demanding payment of the lost wages to her employer. Luckily, as is often the case, my client's employer was amenable to a settlement. My supervising attorney and I ultimately saved time and resources on both sides with this solution, while making our client whole by recovering her lost wages.

This process emphasizes the difference representation can make for low-income clients. Most people don't know the specifics of state and federal employment protections under the law. For that reason, they might not know when their rights have been violated, and/or how to find a solution. Having a legal aid attorney present to look over the facts of the case and write a brief demand letter can make all the difference, recovering hundreds or thousands of dollars for individuals to whom that money means the ability to pay for rent, food, childcare, and other necessities—all (often) without ever stepping foot in a courtroom.

Update 4: Over the course of my time at Greater Boston Legal Services, I've often had to use an interpreter to speak with my clients. This is something that I have thought about a lot over the last several weeks, especially in the context of a client who speaks Kiiiche—a language for which it's not easy to find an interpreter. Though there are plenty of languages like Spanish or Portuguese which are widely spoken here, others like Kiiiche are rare worldwide.

Thinking about this language barrier has reminded me of the importance of legal aid organizations like GBLS as well as worker centers and their community partners. Workers, regardless of immigration status, are entitled to protection from abuse and exploitation in the workplace. There is no language restriction to those legal protections. Yet for those workers who cannot speak or understand English (or another widely spoken language), the question looms: how can people discover what their rights are, let alone seek compensation when those rights are violated? Helping such workers is not a profitable pursuit, but it's an important one. GBLS and similar legal aid organizations around the country take on this pursuit.

Update 5: At the conclusion of my internship with Greater Boston Legal Services, I spent some time reflecting on what I had learned from this experience. First and foremost, I was and remain impressed by the commitment to service displayed by every member of the GBLS team. Each attorney and staff member at GBLS worked



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tirelessly on client advocacy during my time there, with incredible attention to detail. In addition to their normal work, every attorney I worked with took the time to help guide me and the other interns when we encountered tasks that were new for us.

Second, I am proud of the work I did on behalf of GBLS clients. I got a great opportunity to connect with these clients, and to really understand their stories as well as their legal needs and goals. I felt deeply for them when the result of a legal action wasn't what we wanted, and celebrated with them upon receiving news of a positive outcome or a larger-than-expected settlement. Everything GBLS does makes a real difference in the lives of its clients, and this was readily apparent to me the entire time I worked there.

Finally, I am further convinced of the importance of organizations like Equal Justice America, which help to make the public interest work of GBLS interns possible. During my time at GBLS, I not only got the chance to contribute to GBLS's legal aid work, but also got the chance to improve my own skills and knowledge for future work in public interest and pro bono settings. Tasks like interviewing clients through an interpreter and drafting demand letters, alongside presenting clients' cases at unemployment hearings and engaging in policy advocacy, will all be useful experiences to draw on whenever I engage in this type of work going forward. I have no doubt that the other organizations where EJA interns work provide similarly useful experiences and training. Thus, no matter whether the majority of EJA interns continue on to work directly in legal aid organizations like GBLS, in public interest law, or even at private firms with pro-bono programs, it is clear that these fellowships provide interns with the skills and experiences to be successful advocates for our low-income clients.