



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Equip for Equality

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**Update 1:** The Equal Justice America fellowship has allowed me to explore an unfamiliar yet increasingly important area of the law for me. Through its funding, it has given me the fortuity of participating in a field that would have otherwise been inaccessible to me for monetary reasons alone.

During my first few weeks with Equip for Equality, I have had the opportunity to learn the history and birth of disability law and protections, specifically through the lens of special education. With every training session, I came to appreciate the ever-expansive, multifaceted, and protective operations more and more.

Already, I have had the privilege of assisting three families in the effort to ensure special education services for their children. Interestingly, accommodating their needs varied vastly based on the specific stage of the process they found themselves in. Additionally, with every disability, I came to understand how students' goals and successes are defined and executed differently. In all cases though, I witnessed how this service has the capacity to impact people in profound ways.

Most dear to my heart so far, has been my ability to support Spanish-speaking families in a complicated and 'default English' process. Being able to support a vulnerable community I identify with has always been a professional goal of mine and I am thrilled that it is being served here.

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**Update 2:** These past two weeks I have had the opportunity to continue my client-facing work through intakes, records requests, and reviews while also being introduced to Equip for Equality's systemic advocacy work. I worked on a research project that was used by one of our attorneys to testify before the Cook County Commissioners meeting on behalf of our recent findings regarding the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) and its treatment of the juveniles housed in the facility. Specifically, I analyzed over 70 JTDC policies regarding the reporting process and procedures in place to ensure that the harms suffered by



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

the juveniles are accurately represented and accounted for. I was incredibly proud to be a part of a project that brought such horrific issues not seen behind closed doors to light.

I also attended a training session held for Spanish-speaking parents to inform them of the challenging process that is securing special education services, their rights, how valuable self-advocacy is, and how they can execute it themselves. This was a heartwarming event for me to witness as I was able to see the actual community we serve and the potential to empower them through acknowledgment of their own capabilities and capacity to demand just services.

I look forward to working more on both systemic projects and one on one client interactions as they each fulfill my ambitions in different ways.

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**Update 3:** I was recently put into a position that forced me to train and flex my legal muscles by drafting a mediation request. Though we advocate for our clients every day in different forms, I was able to do so by tenderly crafting an argument that would highlight the educational needs of our client, accurately portray how the education system has failed her, and our recommendations for a remedy. This assignment served as a powerful demonstration of how different strategies and tactics can translate distinctly based on the medium it takes.

This form of advocacy was especially moving to me since I had to review all of the student's school records and speak to her mother and herself in order to deeply understand their needs. In this capacity, I was able to connect to the student and put myself in the best position to advocate for their best interest. By analyzing the weaknesses in the student's past and present education plan, it informed the potential paths that would need to be taken to allow the student to advance accordingly. I was honored to work on this because it used the legal system to correct the damage parents themselves do not have the capacity to fix alone.

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**Update 4:** On the same note as my previous update, I had the privilege of attending a mediation and deposition training. These are legal proceedings that are an integral part of the resolution process between parties. Though I have had experience with depositions in the past, I have never attended nor been a part of a mediation. I was moved by the direction the training took. My preconceptions about mediations were challenged for the better. I was under the impression that the best thing to do is to take a firm stance for your client, as you are their advocate after all. Though, during our training we learned of some effective methods that actually allow for both parties to have their wishes and needs heard while trying to come up with a happy medium.

Overall, I have come to appreciate and remain in awe of all the clients I was able to meet and their particular battles I was able to assist with. It did leave me disheartened to see the lengths some schools and their districts have gone to deprive students of their legal rights to a Free Appropriate Public Education and for kids with disabilities, a Least Restrictive Environment. What has hurt the most was seeing how the decisions of school



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

officials regarding the education plans of students with disabilities have had enormous impacts on families' finances, life-decisions, struggles, etc. I hope to continue being a hand to hold, an ear to listen, and a voice to fight for these families.

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**Update 5:** The past 12 weeks working with Equip for Equality has been the most gratifying experience of my law school journey thus far. It was a learning exposure that was both humbling and fulfilling for me. Participating in the special education realm of disability law touched a spot in my heart I was unaware existed.

One thing I was able to walk away with was my strong interest in direct client services. In fact, I really valued and appreciated meeting my clients and hearing from them firsthand about their specific issues, wins, losses, personal history, etc. I felt closer to said clients and, in turn, more confident in my ability to effectively communicate their concerns and advocate on their behalf.

I was able to work with about 10 different clients whose specific inquiries ranged from simple things to more complicated endeavors. For example, we informed many parents on their rights regarding special education services their child is legally entitled to. One of my more challenging efforts consisted of requesting a mediation hearing for a student whose school district we suspected had failed them by not identifying their disability early enough in their education and not affording them the appropriate special education services.

I am very thankful for the opportunity to have observed the development and resolution of my cases throughout the summer. While not all of my cases were settled during my time there, I'm certain that Equip for Equality's tireless dedication will exceed all expectations and provide the clients with the upmost support and solution.

During my time here, I realized that special education services and their particular legal need transcend the typical public-school forum. Some of the research I did to fuel the organization's systemic advocacy efforts educated me on the lack of special education services in other spaces, primarily some juvenile detention centers within the state. Though these centers are legally mandated to follow specific protocols and maintain certain standards regarding special education services, a recent report conducted by Equip for Equality found that Cook County Juvenile Detention Center and its Alternative School was hindering the academic success of the students they house. It was an absolute pleasure to be a part of an initiative that dismantles clear injustices.

Equal Justice America and Equip for Equality have both allowed me to continuously do just that. This summer has certainly changed the trajectory of my legal career for the better.