



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Law School: Notre Dame Law School

Organization: Legal Aid Chicago

Update 1:

I am so thankful to have been chosen as a 2023 Equal Justice America (EJA) Summer Fellow. EJA is a non-profit that provides support to law students pursuing work with organizations that provide civil legal aid services. This summer, I am interning at Legal Aid Chicago, an organization committed to seeking justice for people living in poverty. I am part of the Immigrants and Workers' Rights Practice Group at Legal Aid, working on the Immigration Team alongside an incredible team of attorneys, paralegals, and fellow interns.

In my first few weeks at Legal Aid, I have had the opportunity to assist with cases ranging from asylum and naturalization to DACA renewals and work authorization. One of the most common categories of cases we work on is applications for U visas, a pathway which provides nonimmigrant status to victims of qualifying crimes. Unfortunately, many of our clients have experienced domestic violence or other crimes of a violent or sexual nature. Although a U visa is not a pathway to permanent legal status, helping clients obtain a U visa allows them to receive work authorization and deferred action for four years. It is beyond rewarding to see how filing a simple application like this can change someone's life by allowing them to support themselves and their families while healing from unimaginable trauma. I look forward to getting to know more clients' stories throughout the summer and making an impact in any way possible.

Update 2: I think it can be too easy, especially during law school, to forget about the human side of the law. Law is presented as an abstract, faceless concept meant to be pondered, but seldom applied to daily life. Working at [Legal Aid Chicago](#) this summer has allowed me to see the law's application to individual human lives in a unique way.

A couple weeks ago, one of our clients—a single mother—came into the office for an interview with one of the attorneys. Although we advise clients not to bring their children with them, most of our clients live at or near the poverty level and are simply unable to afford childcare. So this client had no choice but to bring her five-year-old daughter. Given the traumatic nature of the things that have happened to our client and her daughter, the attorney did not want the daughter in the room during the interview. This attorney came to my desk and asked if I would like to hang out with a five-year-old for a while. I jumped at the opportunity to help out and



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spent the next hour sitting in our waiting room with the little girl, playing with My Little Ponies and making up backstories for them (in Spanish).

Although this was a deviation from the work I do on a day-to-day basis, that hour was one of the highlights of my summer so far. It pulled me away from my monitor and reminded me of the human beings on the other side of the law. Having the opportunity to interact with the clients we represent reminded me of why public interest work is so important. I feel so thankful to be working at an organization this summer that helps so many vulnerable individuals each day.

Update 3: For those who aren't on LinkedIn, I am very fortunate to share that I have been selected as a 2023 Equal Justice America (EJA) Summer Fellow. EJA provides support to law students pursuing work with organizations that provide civil legal aid services. This summer, I am interning at Legal Aid Chicago, an organization committed to seeking justice for people living in poverty. I am part of the Immigrants and Workers' Rights Practice Group at Legal Aid, working on the Immigration Team on cases ranging from asylum and naturalization to DACA renewals and work authorization.

One small aspect of my work this summer has involved responding to Requests for Evidence (RFEs) issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. USCIS issues these letters when an applicant has applied for some sort of immigration benefit, but has not provided enough supporting documentation for USCIS to make a final determination. These RFEs request evidence ranging from information about an applicant's criminal history to their medical records to supporting affidavits attesting to the applicant's moral character. As straightforward as it may sound, it can be difficult to gather all the information USCIS requests. The instructions are not always clear, and it often involves getting in touch with courts and police agencies to obtain certified documents. I can't imagine how overwhelming it would be to respond to some of these requests without the assistance of an attorney, especially for those whose first language is not English.

The striking reality is that only around one-third of immigrants have legal representation in their immigration cases; the other two-thirds represent themselves pro se. That statistic demonstrates why legal aid organizations are so important—they are often the only way people can gain access to justice. Throughout the summer, I have frequently found myself confused and overwhelmed by the different steps involved in applying for immigration benefits (whether it be responding to an RFE or filling out an application for asylum or something else). As someone with the benefit of a legal education and experienced attorneys to guide me, I can only imagine how hard it would be to navigate this process as an unrepresented person. My internship this summer has constantly reminded me how important organizations like Equal Justice America and Legal Aid Chicago are to creating a fair and balanced legal system.

Update 4: This is the final week of my internship at Legal Aid Chicago, and we are currently preparing to hold a pro se asylum clinic on Friday. The goal of this clinic is to help twelve asylum-seekers fill out their asylum applications and submit them, along with all required supporting documents, to USCIS. Unfortunately, Legal Aid (like most other non-profit organizations in the area) does not have the capacity to take on new clients, so we aren't able to provide full legal representation to those who will be attending. After the clinic ends, they will proceed pro se and have full responsibility for the remainder of their asylum cases. Even though we aren't able to continue representing these clients, this clinic will still (hopefully) be a life-changing experience for them. Beginning the asylum process can be daunting. There are so many requirements and forms to fill out, so just



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having the assistance of an attorney at this first step might mean the difference between ever applying for asylum and not. And even though the immigration process is incredibly slow (it could take several years for applicants to even get an interview with USCIS, and there is no guarantee they'll be granted asylum at the end of it), submitting an application will open the door for them in so many other ways. Those with pending applications are eligible to apply for work authorization, for example, which means they can continue to live and support themselves while awaiting next steps.

Holding pro se clinics like this one is an incredible way to provide legal access to individuals who might not otherwise be able to receive it. It can be expensive to retain a private attorney, and many legal aid organizations are at capacity with so many people needing help and so few legal aid attorneys to provide it. Innovative ideas like this are so important in the realm of legal aid, and I am continuously impressed by those who work in this area and their ambition to help as many people as possible.

Update 5: Although it saddens me to share that my summer internship in the Immigrants' and Workers' Rights practice group at Legal Aid Chicago has come to an end, I am endlessly thankful for the experience. First and foremost, I am extremely grateful for the support of Equal Justice America, without which I and so many other law students may not have been able to pursue public interest internships this summer. I am also incredibly thankful for every attorney and paralegal in the IWR practice group who provided me with such meaningful guidance and mentorship throughout the summer.

In my previous #EJAFellowUpdate, I described the pro se asylum clinic we were preparing to hold on my last day. I am pleased to share that the clinic was an enormous success! I was assigned my own client to assist with filling out his asylum application and compiling his supporting materials. In the span of just a few hours, we were able to fill out and submit a completed asylum application to USCIS. Although Legal Aid Chicago is unable to retain the twelve individuals we helped for full representation, it is our hope that helping them to complete this first, daunting step of submitting an asylum application will alleviate a lot of the stress and uncertainty that accompanies immigration proceedings.

My client had only arrived in the United States two months prior, so he knew very little English and I had plenty of opportunity to practice my Spanish. A large chunk of the day involved filling out paperwork, so in the meantime, I took the opportunity to get to know my client and listen to him tell his story of fleeing persecution in his home country. Without going into too much detail, it was truly astounding to me to listen to a seventeen-year-old talk about such traumatic events in such a nonchalant fashion. The unfortunate reality is that the things he and his family have experienced are extraordinarily commonplace for so many asylum-seekers. Listening to his story was a poignant reminder of why this work is so important. There is a huge misconception surrounding immigrants in the United States—that they are coming here to wreak havoc on our country, bringing drugs and crime in their wake. In reality, many of the clients I've had the privilege of helping this summer came to the U.S. in order to flee exactly that and to pursue a better life.

The opportunity to work directly with so many clients this summer and to hear their stories has only reaffirmed my commitment to pursuing nonprofit immigration work. I am excited to take the practical knowledge I have gained about immigration law, along with the insights I've gained about trauma-informed representation of vulnerable clients, into my future career as a public interest attorney.