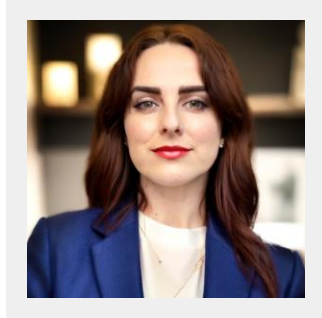




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



Name: Ashton Hessee

Law School: New York Law School

Organization: New York Legal Assistance Group

Update 1:

I am interning this summer with NYLAG's LGBTQ+ Law Project. While I may only have just started, this opportunity has already brought me many new friends and learning opportunities.

While I have always wanted to pursue a career in LGBTQ+ Rights law, this work is now more important than ever. The accessibility of free legal representation for members of the Queer community to fight against systemic discrimination is invaluable. Whether their legal issue is in regards to immigration, housing, healthcare, employment discrimination, or a name/gender marker change, at NYLAG they are met by a team who is ready and willing to represent them holistically while honoring their identity.

For so long our clients have endured trauma as a result of identity-based violence, and to finally be met with compassion and understanding is no small thing. While the legal system itself is complex and dense, our clients can move forward with confidence that we will do everything possible to achieve their goals and help make it possible for them to safely exist as their true selves – a privilege that is often abstract for community members.

While inequity is no stranger to the world of legal services and public interest work, it is with the help of Equal Justice America that law students can afford to accept these wonderful opportunities to make legal representation more accessible.

Update 2:

It is again a pleasure to share with you the importance of public interest work and the legal field and the incredible value that fellowships provide to law students like me who would otherwise have to work for free. As a first-generation college student and law student, I have always struggled with the accessibility of unpaid internships and opportunities that my peers had been able to seize without risking their means of survival.

Especially in light of the recent SCOTUS decisions, intentional accessibility to educational opportunities are more important than ever. Everyone regardless of their socioeconomic background deserves ample opportunity to accept internship offers without having to compromise their financial well-being. Rather, everyone

*especially because of their socioeconomic background deserves the chance to accept these opportunities, as a



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

diverse workplace is a BETTER workplace, period. As someone who worked four jobs at any given time throughout college, I resent the oversimplification of “paying one’s dues” or “pulling myself up by my bootstraps”. I did it, I am doing it, and I am perpetually exhausted. This should not be the norm, and luckily folks like EJA are making valuable opportunities attainable in a sector of the legal field that is so underfunded.

Update 3:

As the summer progresses, I am increasingly thankful to be working in the field of direct services and have the change make an immediate difference in people’s lives. Particularly for the most marginalized members of the LGBTQIA2s+ community, visibility is either not a privilege that is afforded at all, or when it is, comes at a grave cost.

This week I worked with several of our asylum clients, trans women who have traveled across countries in order to find a place where they can safely be their true selves. In the wake of the Supreme Court’s 303 Creative ruling, I have found myself particularly discouraged and cynical at the diminishing state of LGBTQIA2s+ civil rights in our country. However, I have challenged myself to make space for conflicting emotions within my heart and mind.

While I feel incredibly disappointed and afraid at the direction of legal precedent as it affects the Queer community, I also feel happiness for my clients who have gone through inexplicable pain and torture to finally arrive to a country where they feel safe(r). While this land is by no means a paradise of liberty, it is a place where they can sleep a little more soundly at night surrounded by caring legal and community professionals working tirelessly on their behalf.

I am working not just for a country that I can feel safe in, but for one that has the ability to embrace and protect my clients in the way that they so truly deserve.

Update 4:

First, I’d like to ask, what’s in a name?

This summer I was reminded firsthand the importance, respect, and expression that belongs to a name – and the value of being referred to by a name that belongs to you. For some of us, that name is the one we were given at birth, or perhaps it is a nickname that your close friends have called you for the past several decades, and you have no idea how they came up with it.

For my clients this summer, pursuing a legal name change with the Manhattan Civil Court was a core step in validating their gender identity. Some of our clients had recently come out and this step signified the beginning of their gender affirmation process. For others, they have gone by their chosen name for years, but have never been “officially” identified as themselves by the government.

Personally, I realized how lucky I am to receive mail in the name that I go by; to receive an automated email address generated by my school in the name that I go by; to be introduced to strangers as the name that I go by; to not have to navigate the dangerous complexities that accompany carrying around an ID that does not match the name that I go by; to not have to explain to my medical providers why my name is different in their charts;



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

to not have to correct somebody who forgets to look at the “preferred name” field on their generic intake document; to have an obituary that reads the name that I went by.

Being able to assist my clients in legally changing their name to reflect who they are this summer is an experience I will carry with me for the rest of my life. While a legal name change is not the first, only, or perhaps most important step in someone’s gender affirmation journey, it is a step that deserves to be achieved by all who wish to do so. I am very proud of NYLAG’s LGBTQ+ Law Project for making this process accessible, and proud of the work that I contributed over the last three months

Update 5:

I can’t even begin to express my gratitude for all the folks I have met this summer during my internship with NYLAG’s LGBTQ+ Law Project. It is such an honor and a privilege to be able to connect with passionate individuals who begin each day with one goal – to be a zealous advocate.

Being a zealous advocate is more than what the rules of professional responsibility require. It means bringing your whole self to cause, meeting people where they are at, and offering authentic and genuine representation.

As legal professionals, we often see people as they are enduring perhaps their greatest struggle. To have the patience and drive to accept clients for all that they are going through, and to take the whole of their experience and shape it into the most positive outcome possible, requires heart and soul – something that lawyers often get a bad rep for missing.

As I reflect on the work I completed during my internship, I can look at several writing pieces or filed applications with USCIS, but most importantly, I look at my phone call log. I spent countless hours on the phone with people during intake consultations, as they were actively going through an emergency, or just did not know who else to call and saw “legal assistance” in our organization name. These conversations, serving as a person who maybe had just a clue of what was going on but was willing to listen and validate, were the most important part of my summer.

The world can be a terrifying place, especially for members of the LGBTQ+ community in this political climate. Welcoming folks into our office with open arms or spending several hours talking over the phone felt like a healing experience to some degree for all involved. Legal problems will hardly be solved overnight, or even perhaps over several late nights, but knowing that there is someone willing to support you to the best of their ability provides great comfort.

Accessibility to legal representation is truly fundamental, and I am so proud to have learned from the wonderful folks at NYLAG and witnessed the importance of free legal advice and services.