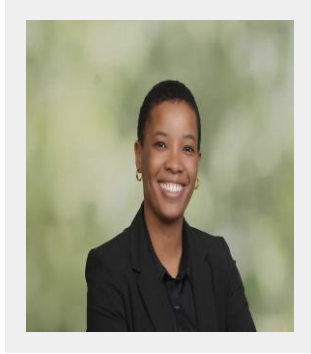




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Nephthys Smith

**Law School:** NYU Law

**Organization:** Abolitionist Law Center

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**Update 1:** I just finished my first year at New York University School of Law. The first year of law school was difficult academically, yes, but also emotionally. I felt very disconnected from the reason why I came to law school in the first place, which was to join the fight of people and organizations pushing for systemic change.

This summer, however, I am looking forward to re-centering that mission by getting hands on experience at a legal organization that is making a difference. I am able to make that happen, in many ways, because I have been named an Equal Justice America Fellow this summer. Thanks to EJA's additional summer funding, I was able to accept an internship with Abolitionist Law Center, an organization I have wanted to work with since I first heard about them years ago at an online symposium focused on abolition. Since much of the work they do is in person, I can use the extra money to commute back and forth to Philadelphia.

Even though this commuting schedule might be tough, I know it will be worth it as my first week at Abolitionist Law Center has been more than I could've ever imagined. Our supervisors welcomed us with a very immersive orientation program. The training was informative and creative, focusing on different ways to use civil law to work toward prison abolition. ALC particularly focuses on ending the inhumane practice of solitary confinement. The lawyers at ALC don't only use the law creatively; they also intentionally practice people-centered and trauma-informed lawyering. I'm grateful to be able to learn from such incredible lawyers this summer and look forward to updating you about this experience.

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**Update 2:** It is only my third week at Abolitionist Law Center, but I have gotten right to work! I've co-written a memo with another intern, researched a personal assignment, and connected with those affected by inhumane jail conditions through client interviews. I have also watched the ALC attorneys shine in court; I saw months' worth of hard work and preparation hopefully lead to a much-deserved outcome for a client. On that day, ALC



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packed the court with over twenty-five supporters in the public seating area because of the community-led model through which they run.

Another highlight of the last two weeks was the “Solidarity not Solitary” conference hosted by ALC and its partners. The conference highlighted the organizing work and collaboration that occurs between currently and formerly incarcerated people, organizers, and lawyers who can support them from the outside. People from all over the Northeast shared the solitary confinement legislation they either worked on or successfully passed in states like New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. ALC supports similar legislation in Pennsylvania. Each group who shared, though celebrating the reduction in duration and scope of solitary confinement, continues to fight to ultimately abolish the horrifying practice.

I feel grateful to be a part of the urgent and necessary work taking place at ALC. This organization, started and led by people who have experienced incarceration, shows how civil legal work *must* focus on the rights of people in the criminal legal system.

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**Update 3:** It has been another amazing two weeks at the Abolitionist Law Center.

Last week, a former client of ALC’s came to the office to speak with the legal interns. He explained what it was like organizing to end solitary confinement and improve prison conditions (with the ultimate goal of abolishing them) from the inside when he was incarcerated. He spoke about the essential allyship role that lawyers can play in assisting people experiencing some of the worst civil rights violations imaginable but did so with the urgent reminder to center (and *not* speak over) the people who have personally experienced the horrors of the prison system. I won’t rehash the specifics of what he went through without his permission, but our guest speaker was raw and honest about how cruel the unchecked power dynamic is between prison guards and incarcerated folks as well as how harrowing solitary confinement can be. Even with this hard to hold information, he ended his talk inspiring us both to take action and share lessons learned with others in order to grow this necessary movement.

In between my EJA updates, we have experienced both ‘Independence Day’ and three major Supreme Court losses. This discrepancy reminds us that even though we must be grounded in the work lawyers do to protect individual civil rights, we must also remember that civil legal work should be accompanied by legislative, material, and structural changes, as it can be easily combated. Our public interest efforts must show up in all aspects of our lives in order to strengthen and prolong them

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**Update 4:** The theme of this week’s post is collaboration, as the past two weeks have involved working with a lot of people outside of ALC’s office.



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I started working on two major assignments recently that have encouraged me to think about how connected criminal legal work is to other fields. Abolitionist Law Center does a lot of work with compassionate release, and learning more about this process has put the disparity in the quality of treatment offered in prisons as well as the mental and physical toll incarceration can have on the body front and center. To remedy this, it is essential to identify and collaborate with allies in the medical field who can help minimize the harm done to people who are both sick and incarcerated in both prisons and general hospitals.

In another project, I have started to think about the role nonprofits can play in supporting formerly or currently incarcerated people with their daily emergency needs. Often legal organizations that provide services can provide individuals with just that, services. Working with organizations that have a bit more flexibility allows for the additional service of providing people struggling with cash in hand. This both centers people's agency and provides additional support for the collateral consequences of poverty and incarceration (which often go hand in hand).

Finally, two weeks ago, a former client of ALC came into the office to speak with us. After his life sentence was overturned, he was released from prison and started working with an organization that mentors youth and guides them through a restorative justice model of accountability. This program partially exists because of a willing District Attorney's Office, as well as because of committed volunteers who show up for the young people going through the program.

These past two weeks have reminded me how important it is for us to all work together toward the future we believe in.

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**Update 5:** I can't believe my time at Abolitionist Law Center has come to an end. Without a doubt, I can confidently say that spending the summer with ALC has been a life-changing decision. I want to thank EJA for the additional funding that allowed me to make this internship a reality and have an in-person experience this summer.

Everything I have worked on this summer came together when I had the pleasure of meeting one of ALC's compassionate release clients during the last week of my internship. It was an emotional visit. Though we celebrated his release into hospice care, this older gentleman reminded us of his deep disappointment and frustrations with the cards he was dealt by our overly punitive and often inaccurate justice system. I initially felt powerless as I listened to his first-hand experiences, overwhelmed by the size and strength of the system that robs so many of the lives they deserve to lead.

The ALC Staff attorney in the room, however, immediately and instinctively responded to his words by getting him on the phone with a friend, who just so happened to be another client ALC helped release after spending



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over 20 years in prison. The attorney helped the client come up with a plan to do something he enjoys with his loved ones, empowering him and centering his no longer threatened autonomy.

That level of intention and care the attorney showed was inspiring. It was a subtle but effective reminder that we can center joy instead of succumbing to fear when facing these systems. Moreover, the creative problem solving reminded me that going above and beyond for the people we work with and meeting them where they are at is just as important as focusing on the legal work we do.

ALC, incredibly, is exceptional at both the personal and professional sides of this work. They refuse to treat the people they serve like cases instead of individuals but also have an impressive record of filed lawsuits and legislative advocacy. This summer, I have met some of the most charismatic speakers, creative legal minds, bright researchers, decisive team leaders, and kind spirits in the field. It has been an honor to work with the Abolitionist Law Center and I will carry this experience with me for a long time.