



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: AIDS Law Project of PA

Update 1: Today I am pleased to announce that I am receiving funding as an Equal Justice America Fellow to support my legal work this summer at the AIDS Law Project of PA! Equal Justice America provides financial assistance to law students working at civil legal aid organizations in order to expand equal access to justice for all.

As an EJA Fellow, I will be sharing updates throughout the summer to spread awareness of the importance of civil legal aid. Vulnerable communities are systemically disadvantaged at every level and the legal system is often unavailable or unapproachable. Expanding justice to those living with HIV/AIDS has been especially rewarding in light of our historical failure to treat those individuals with the dignity that they deserve.

Although I have seen a variety of issues while working in client intake, I would like to specifically highlight our firm's work on name change petitions. Through the ALPP's Jaci Adams Identity Initiative, we provide name change services to acutely vulnerable communities affected by HIV, including trans people. Helping individuals change their names is a uniquely rewarding and restorative process. When a client obtains a name change decree, it is a legal validation of their identity that enables them to be recognized as who they are rather than what they were called at birth. Allowing someone to present an ID with their chosen name directly reduces the discrimination they will face in public services, employment, travel, housing, and many other areas of life.

In my view, this work directly addresses the ways that our systems have ignored trans people and people living with HIV/AIDS. It is an honor to help provide such a validating service.

Update 2: I would like to talk about a simple but necessary part of legal aid: estate documents! In PA, an attorney is not required by law to create a valid Last Will and Testament but having counsel to properly plan and draft a will can help avoid unwanted outcomes or protracted court processes in probate. People without many assets may not need especially complex wills, but everyone should have a will of some kind. When one passes away without a will, their property is subject to intestate succession, which can lead to property going to



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family members or the government. A will allows one to choose trusted friends or a chosen family, important to the LGBTQ+ community where estranged family relationships are sadly common.

Emergency wills were a huge part of the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania during the most brutal times of the epidemic. Due to the lack of treatment and attention from institutions, people living with HIV and AIDS had very low life expectancies. These people, often young and formerly healthy, had to scramble to get their affairs in order before it was too late. It's an honor to intern in the legacy of that work, when ALPP's provision of basic services in that emergency context provided dignity for people who often could not find it elsewhere. Something so simple as estate documents can be incredibly meaningful when they need to be!

As always, I do these updates to promote the important civil aid work that I and thousands of other law students do!

Update 3: Happy 7/11 everyone! Today I am posting my third EJA Fellow update about my work at the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania. My work at the Law Project is centered around our clients and understanding their stories.

For the first half of the day, the other students and I conduct intake interviews with potential clients. Expectedly, these interviews are often emotional and traumatic as we need to discuss the legal issues people are facing. It is a balance trying to guide the interviewee through more technical questions and listening to their story as they need to tell it. There are many types of callers, but often we find people in the middle of incredibly traumatic events, like evictions. Helping people work through injustice and trauma is probably the most rewarding part of the job. In terms of trauma, the interviews are often a lot. I find that a short walk or a few deep breaths with a fellow student, or simply venting about the interview tends to make me feel more balanced. For a career in public interest, I can certainly see how more long-term mental healthcare is important.

At first, my interviews were somewhat robotic as I learned to ask all of the right questions in a sensible order. After some experience I grew warmer and our interviews began to feel a lot more conversational. These experiences can be very enriching, especially in a case where progress is made and hopefully we can resolve the legal issue. As easy as it is to take trauma and rough experiences home with you, fortunately the good experiences stick out as well. Even interviews with people who we cannot help, either due to limited resources or other reasons, have a shard of hope in that I helped refer someone to the right agency and at least heard their story with dignity. It is easy to understand their frustration when systems fail to acknowledge a person's humanity and experiences.

Update 4: Good morning! Welcome to my fourth EJA Fellow Update about working at the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania. Today I would like to focus on housing issues, one of our busiest practice areas.

ALPP mainly works with repairs, evictions, utilities, subsidized housing, and other disputes. Because shelter is a basic human need, working with clients to resolve their landlord/tenant issues can be life-changing for them.



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There are many reasons we would consider a housing situation an emergency, such as impending lockout, and therefore escalate that intake to an attorney for review as soon as possible.

I am obviously not a housing attorney, but the situation for tenants facing housing issues is night and day depending on whether that person understands the court process. Large management companies and landlords often bank on tenants failing to appear to their hearings at housing court. While a tenant could have various substantive arguments that could influence their case, if they are not careful with the eviction process those arguments mean little. There are also many procedural steps that landlords themselves skip, but these can go unnoticed without legal advice or research. Philadelphia has an eviction diversion program thankfully, but there is still clearly a gulf in tenants' ability to access the protection of the law.

Often, in situations like evictions, we advise clients and interviewees on illegal lockouts. It is unfortunately common for some landlords to attempt to remove tenants from properties without going through the court process. This can be a traumatizing experience for clients who find their utilities suddenly cut off or their locks changed without notice. I am proud to do my part as an intern to help people retain shelter as long as possible.

Update 5: As the summer comes to an end, I am reflecting on my experiences as a summer intern at AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania. The many clients and potential clients that I was able to assist, even in seemingly small ways, come to mind first. Specifically, it was a very enriching experience to be able to interview different potential clients alongside ALPP's intake team. I am very glad that this opportunity allowed me to connect with marginalized communities and work to expand their basic access to justice.

Following up with clients' cases alongside the assigned staff attorneys also provided me with some insight into the progression of certain cases. I am sure that being more comfortable with legal issues like evictions and housing issues, name changes, wills and estate documents, and a few property issues will be helpful for my future public interest work. Thank you to the brilliant and dedicated attorneys I was able to work with in these areas over the summer!

I am also taking away some of the realities of public interest work. Running a non-profit legal aid organization like ALPP requires a delicate balancing of resources by its managing staff. While working on quality assurance review, it was clear that the ALPP was not an organization that let people fall through the cracks. It was a pleasure to have this summer experience in public interest law and I look forward to future opportunities in the field!