



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Ascend Justice

Update 1:

I'm excited to share that this summer, I'm interning with Ascend Justice in the immigration division. I've been lucky enough to receive funding from Equal Justice America, an organization that shares my commitment to ensuring access to justice for all. As part of my fellowship, I'll be sharing some updates about my work over the summer.

Ascend Justice empowers survivors of gender-based violence with a variety of holistic legal services. Working at the intersection of immigration and gender-based violence issues has been a goal of mine even before I entered law school, and I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to develop my advocacy skills with Ascend Justice.

In the first few weeks, I've seen just how important it is that Ascend Justice treats clients as whole people. Clients are able to access services to resolve pressing concerns and emergencies, but also to set them up for long-term stability and security. So far, my work with the Ascend Justice immigration team has overlapped with family law and the Incarcerated Survivors Project. I've loved gaining exposure to multiple areas of law, and I also appreciate that clients can have one trusted place to turn to for many legal needs. Someone who first comes into contact with Ascend Justice when seeking an emergency order of protection against an abusive partner may ultimately also receive assistance obtaining custody of their children, applying for programs to ease the cost of housing and healthcare, or getting immigration relief that puts them on a path to citizenship—all from a team of compassionate, trauma-informed lawyers and client support coordinators.

I look forward to delving further into this work over the summer and sharing updates along the way.

Update 2:

I've been interning with Ascend Justice for almost a month now, and the highlight of my experience so far has been getting to know more about our clients. The reason I'm drawn to direct legal services and immigration law is the chance to learn the stories of people with diverse backgrounds. Working with individuals who have gone



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through traumatic experiences takes patience. Lawyers aren't entitled to their clients' trust; rather, lawyers have the responsibility of making sure clients feel safe and comfortable opening up. It may take months, or even longer, for a client to share intimate details of what may have been the worst time of their life.

When judged in immigration court and the court of public opinion, immigrants often don't get the chance to share their full story. At best, their experience is condensed into paper filings and oral testimony in a nerve-racking setting. Those of you reading this in Chicago might have also been following the news about recently arrived migrants, bussed to Chicago from other states. You've likely heard about migrants struggling to find shelter, sleeping on the floor of police stations without adequate food or medical care. Perhaps you've read some brief quotes from individuals discussing why they came to the United States—maybe they're fleeing persecution or political and economic instability. Before rushing to judgment, I hope you understand that those images or news stories can never give you the whole picture. Remember that it takes time and trust to understand what someone carried with them on their journey to the United States and the challenges they've faced living here undocumented. I'm grateful to be in this line of work, and I encourage you to welcome people into our community with respect and empathy.

Update 3:

Lately, my work with Ascend Justice's immigration team has overlapped with the organization's Incarcerated Survivors Project, which provides a variety of legal services to survivors of gender-based violence impacted by incarceration. Any criminal conviction or prison sentence can have a major impact on a person's life going forward, potentially limiting one's access to employment or housing. Interaction with the criminal legal system can be a harrowing experience emotionally, and incarceration may severely impact a person's mental and physical health. For people who are not U.S. citizens, a criminal conviction can have especially devastating consequences. Many criminal convictions may render a noncitizen "removable," meaning they could be deported even after completing their sentence. Deportation tears apart families and communities, sometimes permanently.

At the intersection of criminal and immigration law, noncitizen victims of domestic violence are at great risk. An abuser might file a police report against their victim, even falsely alleging that the victim is the abusive person. An abuser might also threaten to call ICE and get the victim deported as a means of manipulating and controlling the victim. Being undocumented already makes a person vulnerable, and a perpetrator of domestic violence can exploit that.

I'm grateful that organizations like Ascend Justice offer wraparound services to individuals who find themselves at these dangerous, confusing crossroads. Obtaining immigration benefits can be a lifeline, helping survivors of domestic violence to thrive independently, and efforts to mitigate the consequences of criminal convictions can help people to remain where they feel safe and supported by loved ones.



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Update 4:

Since my last update, I've been learning more about screening clients for eligibility for asylum. Unfortunately, obtaining asylum is a more difficult process than many imagine. To be eligible for asylum, a person needs to show that they have suffered persecution because of at least one protected ground: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. That standard means that many people who have endured violence and tragedy in their home country—and who would, in all likelihood, be safer if they remained in the U.S.—still may be ineligible for asylum.

However, one of those protected grounds - “membership in a particular social group” - can, with some creative lawyering, accommodate a variety of people who would be in danger if forced to return to their home country. Survivors of domestic violence might find relief through this path. That said, the definition of a particular social group evolves for better and worse over time, sometimes based only on the arbitrary decisions of a single political actor. For asylum seekers, these frequent changes in the law can literally be a matter of life and death. Trying to navigate that process without an attorney can be even more challenging. Fortunately, a lot of great legal aid organizations have fought to protect asylum seekers, both through direct representation and by challenging new laws and policies that would exclude and endanger immigrants. I'm grateful to be able to help Ascend Justice protect immigrant survivors of gender-based violence, and support from organizations like Equal Justice America makes that work possible.

Update 5:

My time with Ascend Justice is coming to an end soon, and I am so grateful for the experience I've had this summer. Going into this internship, I was excited to dive deeper into areas of immigration law that are especially relevant for survivors of gender-based violence. I've learned a lot about the process for applying for U visas, which are available for victims of certain crimes, and VAWA, which allows survivors of domestic abuse to petition for lawful permanent resident status independent of their abusive spouse or family member. But I ended up learning so much more beyond that, thanks to Ascend Justice's holistic approach. Through my work with the immigration team, I also gained exposure to family law and criminal law. For example, I got to evaluate potential clients for their eligibility for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, which is available for immigrant children who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected by a parent. In support of the work of the Incarcerated Survivors Project, I also got to delve into the complex overlap of criminal and immigration law. Beyond growing my knowledge of substantive law, I also learned a ton from Ascend Justice's team about what it takes to be a great lawyer when working with clients in vulnerable situations. The immigration team and client support services staff go above and beyond to make Ascend Justice a safe and supportive one-stop-shop for legal and social services. I've admired the attorneys' compassion and commitment to identifying creative ways to help clients, even when the odds seem stacked against them. They're willing to confront difficult conversations head-on and support each other when times get tough. I'm grateful for their guidance and advice.



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This summer has reaffirmed my commitment to public interest work, and especially immigration law. It's fulfilling to be able to choose a career where I can meet people from all walks of life and work with others who share my values and vision of changing our society for the better. Thankfully, the financial support I've received from Equal Justice America and University of Chicago Law School have made it possible for me to pursue a career I'm passionate about and to serve others. Thank you to everyone at Ascend Justice for creating such a warm and welcoming environment and for so many wonderful learning opportunities.