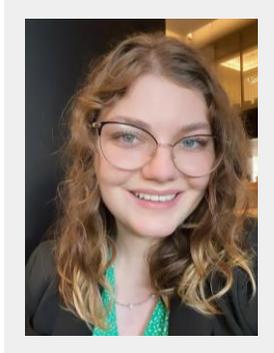




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



Name: Rachel Caldwell

Law School: The University of Chicago

Organization: Equip for Equality

Update 1: Wrapping up my first year at the University of Chicago Law School, I am excited to start the summer as an Equal Justice America Fellow. EJA will fund my internship at Equip for Equality, an incredible nonprofit that advocates for disability rights. Although I just finished my second week at EFE, I have already learned so much about how incarceration disparately and uniquely impacts disabled individuals, how the carceral system has failed to provide incarcerated disabled students with accommodations, and how individuals with disabilities can use alternatives to guardianship to maintain autonomy while receiving support. While many people may think of the Americans with Disabilities Act when they think of disability law, and this Act certainly is important, disability law intersects with every area of the law. I am grateful to be working at an organization that embodies this by centering the autonomy of disabled persons. I look forward to deepening my understanding of disability's intersection with every part of the law, at both the systemic and individual levels. Please consider donating to ensure fellows like me can continue to receive funding for summer public interest work in the future. Note: I use "disabled persons" and "people with disabilities" interchangeably. Many disabled people have different preferences about which language is best. The former follows the social model of disability, which recognizes that people are disabled by a non-accessible society, and the latter emphasizes the humanity of the person with a disability.

Update 2: I'm now well into my internship at Equip for Equality, and it's time for another EJA Fellow Update (with a view)! In the past few weeks, I've improved at issue spotting as I've completed more client intakes, and learned what questions to ask as I've observed very talented attorneys conduct depositions. On a larger scale, I've learned to piece together thousands of pages of evidence into a cohesive timeline. When I used to think of advocacy, it seemed equivalent to argumentation or persuasion. This summer, I've realized what a significant role evidence collection plays in advocacy. Before anyone can make a convincing argument, they have to understand the situation at hand. In addition to developing these legal skills, I've begun to understand the importance of questioning expert opinions— whether they are systemic or individual in nature. To be the best



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advocates, we must understand how experts come to their conclusions. Accountability of institutions housing people with mental illness and the extent of a person's freedom to make their own life choices can depend on such expert determinations. We can't take them for granted! Most public interest legal internships are unpaid. To make these experiences more accessible to law students like me, please consider donating to Equal Justice America.

Update 3: Historically, institutionalization has significantly infringed on the rights of people with disabilities without providing adequate care. For example, one former institution had only 1 staff person for 3000 institutionalized people. While long-term care facilities have certainly improved since then, they are not perfect, and require outside accountability. I am proud to work with an organization that continues to look out for the rights of individuals involuntarily living at nursing care facilities pursuant to a court order or a guardian decision. Did you know a person under guardianship can obtain their own legal counsel? At Equip for Equality, I have the opportunity to not only become familiar with the legal processes of transfer and discharge, but also become familiar with the individuals whose autonomy are dictated by these processes. On intake calls for potential clients, I have heard individuals tell their stories. I have been trusted with their most personal records and feel as though I've gotten to know them as I comb for evidence and prepare for discovery. While I have gained invaluable insight into the strategic timing of a case and what questions to ask during discovery, the most important experience has been the humanization of my legal knowledge as I start to work with real people. To ensure that legal interns can continue to contribute to, and learn from, civil public interest work, please consider donating to Equal Justice America.

Update 4: Last weekend, I had the opportunity to attend Disability Pride in Chicago as a part of my internship with Equip for Equality. Many people don't realize that disability is more than a medical diagnosis—it intertwines with identity and culture. Although disability law usually focuses on ameliorating negative treatment of disability, such as discrimination or lack of access, Disability Pride reminded me of the joy that comes with disability community.

Tabling with my colleagues, I not only explained the legal services Equip for Equality provides, but listened to the work that other attendees were doing— releasing podcasts, acting in TV shows, and handing out handmade crafts. All of this creativity reminded me of the creativity and ingenuity that many people with disabilities develop from navigating an inaccessible world. No matter the field—creative arts or law— disabled people belong, and we bring new approaches everywhere we go.

Update 5: I recently wrapped up my internship with the Civil Rights Team at Equip for Equality this summer! I am so grateful to everyone who provided mentorship and took the time to talk through legal strategies with me in the pursuit of disability rights.

During the last few weeks of my internship, I had the opportunity to draft two complaints, sit in on a mediation and discuss negotiation strategies with the attorney on the case, and dig deep into Medicaid law and ADA



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discrimination claims. My internship class also visited the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Rachel Arfa, and received a tour of City Hall.

Coming into this internship, I was aware of various legal avenues for pursuing disability justice. However, during the past few months I have learned how different parts of the law interact with each other and inform each other's interpretation. Rather than approaching disability rights in a piecemeal fashion, I now understand how different statutes overlap and influence disabled individuals' day-to-day lives. I've also realized that even if someone has a right to certain services or should have a right to certain services, they don't always receive those services due to administrative obstacles or lack of availability.

This summer, I developed a baseline understanding of the ADA, Due Process rights, Medicaid programs, and guardianship proceedings. As I return to University of Chicago Law School, I look forward to building on this knowledge by taking courses such as Employment Discrimination. In addition to my coursework, I will continue turning this knowledge into action by volunteering at Equip for Equality and creating systemic change.

Thank you to Equal Justice America for funding my summer at Equip for Equality and allowing me to help more people with disabilities access justice and the resources they need and deserve. I'm so grateful to have had such an educational and meaningful summer.

Please consider donating to Equal Justice America.