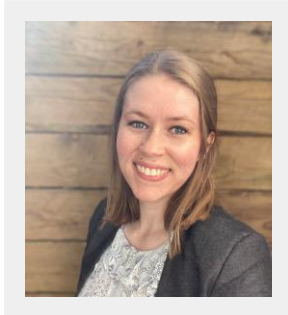




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Lane Wheeler

**Law School:** University of Michigan Law School

**Organization:** Veterans Legal Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School

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**Update 1:** I'm thrilled to start the summer before 3L as an Equal Justice America fellow while I work as a Student Attorney in the Veterans Legal Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School. I worked in the Veterans Legal Clinic this past semester, and chose to stay on through the summer so I could advocate for clients, litigate cases, and develop lawyering skills over a much longer period than just ten weeks.

I hit the ground running on my first morning back at the Veterans Legal Clinic for the summer (after a couple weeks off to celebrate the end of finals season) by arguing for my clients in a hearing for an eviction case. Since then, I negotiated a settlement agreement which resulted in dismissal of the case and return of escrow to my clients. Working on a case from intake last semester through settlement this summer was extremely rewarding. Since free representation is not guaranteed in civil cases, any services pro bono attorneys or student attorneys can offer in housing law make a difference.

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**Update 2:** This week, I read a post by Community Legal Aid, the legal aid organization that covers the part of Massachusetts where I grew up, which described how about half of people who request help from legal aid organizations are turned away because there simply is not enough funding or resources available to meet all of their needs.

Law school clinics like the Veterans Legal Clinic at University of Michigan Law School help fill the gap by serving as another resource to provide civil legal services at no cost to people who otherwise would have to navigate the legal system on their own. Since my last #EJAFellowUpdate, I helped a survivor of domestic violence file for divorce and successfully argued a motion in a custody case that brought our client one step closer to their goal. I can't imagine a more important and meaningful summer experience than working at the Veterans Legal Clinic.

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**Update 3:** I have spent a notable portion of my summer trying to navigate through the bureaucratic court



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system like an obstacle course. I represent clients in a variety of district and circuit courts throughout Michigan, and each court (sometimes, each judge within a court) has their own preferences for how to file motions, when to file them, electronic, paper copy... the list goes on. Sometimes it's clear, other times I navigate phone tree after phone tree to try to get in touch with a court clerk.

Those aren't the kind of tasks you'll see as the focal point of an exciting legal drama on TV (well, maybe one that gets swiftly cancelled for low viewership!), but I consider them some of the most important things I can do for my clients. The need for legal aid far exceeds the bandwidth that legal aid organizations have to offer, both in terms of budget and staff. If someone cannot afford an attorney and is not represented by legal aid in a civil case, they have to represent themselves in court as a pro se litigant.

When faced with life-altering issues like an eviction notice or trying to increase the parenting time of your child, I cannot imagine trying to navigate the judicial bureaucracy on my own. Unfortunately, that is the reality for many low-income litigants in housing, family, and consumer law cases. So, I am exceptionally grateful I can take that off my clients' plates and make those "boring" phone calls so they can focus on taking care of themselves and their families.

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**Update 4:** Before I started law school, I thought litigation was the best way to resolve conflicts and help clients. Sometimes, it can be. However, my work in direct services this summer has taught me that while litigation can be \*a\* solution to our clients' issues, it is not the only solution. Advocacy is so much broader than what happens inside the four walls of a courtroom.

We are lucky in the Veterans Legal Clinic to have a social work intern, who provides social work services to our clients. People facing issues with housing, for example, can't necessarily wait until the end of a lengthy lawsuit to pay their rent or put down a security deposit on a new apartment. Social workers are excellent partners to have in legal aid organizations, because they can connect clients with services and resources that help address urgent needs.

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**Update 5:** It's time for my final update as an Equal Justice America fellow! Throughout the summer, I shared a glimpse into the legal aid world as I worked as a Student Attorney in the Veterans Legal Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School. I am extremely grateful for the support I received to make this summer happen as I get ready to begin my final year of law school.

Legal services work is crucial because, based on an estimate from Equal Justice America, 80% of the legal needs for people living under the poverty line are not met. Those of us in legal aid are trying to chip away at that gap and increase accessibility for people who cannot afford to hire an attorney. Some issues, like evictions, arise quickly and need immediate help. Others, such as custody disputes, will last for a very long time and involve many court appearances.



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My summer experience affirmed that law truly is a service profession. Getting to know my clients, hear their experiences, and sometimes even step into their shoes for a moment on site visits helped me strongly advocate for them as I told their stories through writing in a brief, or to a judge during a hearing.

Everyone deserves access to safe, affordable housing, and my work this summer helped give me the skills to continue that fight as I begin my post-graduate job search for positions in legal aid.

My work this summer providing direct services to veterans in Michigan wouldn't be possible without Equal Justice America. While my summer has come to an end, EJA will continue to work to protect the rights of those who need help the most by funding law students like me in unpaid, but much needed summer work at legal aid programs.