



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Northwest Workers' Justice Project

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### Update 1:

It's hard to believe I'm almost halfway through my summer clerkship with the Northwest Workers' Justice Project. The past few weeks in Portland have flown by.

NWJP confronts power imbalances in the workplace by providing legal support and education to low-wage, contingent, and immigrant workers. I felt a little in over my head when I first started with NWJP in mid-May—the ins and outs of employment law can be complicated, and my first-year law courses didn't cover writing demand letters or calculating damages. But, thanks to NWJP's supportive and motivated attorneys, I've learned an incredible amount in just a few weeks.

Since starting at NWJP, I've taken on a wide variety of employment and immigration-related research and writing projects. My time in Portland has been filled with some exciting site visits and outreach events, too... but more on those next time.

I'm grateful to receive funding from Equal Justice America and the Rapoport Center for Human Rights at the University of Texas School of Law to support my legal work with NWJP this summer. Without it, I wouldn't have been able to meet the awesome attorneys and summer law clerks at NWJP in person and visit the quirky, wonderful city of Portland for the first time.

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### Update 2:

The Northwest Workers Justice Project's strong ties to the Oregon labor community were a large part of why I chose to spend my summer with this organization. Supporting farmworker organizing efforts in the region with NWJP has allowed me to explore advocacy at the intersection of immigrant and economic justice in ways I had yet to imagine.



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NWJP has a close partnership with El Centro de Servicios para Campesinos—a worker center that serves members of Pineros Y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN) and others in the community. PCUN is Oregon’s only farmworkers union and is based in Woodburn, the heart of Oregon’s agricultural industry. I tagged along with one of NWJP’s attorneys to Woodburn while she held “office hours” for workers at El Centro, giving me the chance to meet members of El Centro’s team and learn about the history of this community space.

I’m thankful to have the chance to learn about the unique challenges and experiences of rural workers in Oregon through my work with a nonprofit that devotes itself to supporting these same workers’ organizing for fairer working conditions. Employment and labor law is a powerful tool to enforce and expand worker protections, but community organizations like El Centro are essential to getting those tools into workers’ hands.

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### **Update 3:**

Movement building is at the heart of NWJP’s work. My coworkers’ commitment to putting power in the hands of our clients is one of the things I admire most about them.

To this end, NWJP does a lot more than representing low-wage workers in employment litigation. NWJP has team members devoted to training and supporting workers so they can organize themselves, equipping them with tools to call out and put an end to workplace abuses through protected concerted activity. Attending these trainings has been a great way to see worker organizing in action while I learn the fundamentals of labor and employment law.

The organization also does outreach to members of the Portland community through many different avenues—including visits to the Mexican Consulate in Portland! We gave know-your-rights presentations and an attorney held “office hours” for folks at the Consulate as they waited to do trámites. NWJP’s lasting relationship with the Consulate is a great example of how nonprofits can make themselves resources to clients from diverse backgrounds through bilingual outreach efforts.

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### **Update 4:**

A highlight of my summer with NWJP was getting to know some of my co-clerks. As unifying as the 1L curriculum can feel, learning from and collaborating with students at other schools was a great way to reflect on different approaches to legal education. It was also a refreshing reminder of the many paths that can lead to law school. But different as we all are, our experiences have led us to a shared commitment to economic justice.

One of my favorite “field trips” and shared moments with my co-clerks was a visit to the Pioneer Courthouse in Portland. We sat in on oral arguments before a diverse panel of Ninth Circuit judges. The courthouse was full of law clerks, some of whom we recognized from a public interest lawyer/law student meet-and-greet from the



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week before. After oral arguments came to a close, the judges opened the floor for a candid Q&A about their paths to the Ninth Circuit, relationships with their clerks, and anything we students in the room were curious about. It was a great chance for my co-clerks and I to zoom out from our day-to-day efforts to protect workers from retaliation, discrimination, and wage theft and reflect on how direct services and appellate-level advocacy fit together.

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## Update 5:

My first legal internship has come to a close. I couldn't imagine a better place to have spent my summer than with the Northwest Workers' Justice Project. Working with a small team gave me the chance to get to know each attorney on a personal level and contribute to a wide range of projects. I admire each and every team member's personal commitment to NWJP's mission of protecting, empowering, and organizing low-wage workers. Over the course of the summer, I wrote motions and memos, conducted intakes, did community outreach, and gained familiarity with bodies of law that were unknown to me before starting my clerkship.

Completing a summer clerkship outside of Texas was refreshing and enriching. Researching and applying Oregon's numerous workers' rights statutes reminded me how different each state's laws can be. It was energizing to work with a team of skilled attorneys whose policy advocacy and litigation have contributed to safer working conditions, decreased wage theft, and protected injured workers from discrimination. But my work with NWJP also reminded me that even in states where worker protections are more robust, the fight for fair wages and safe conditions is far from over.

My time with NWJP has sparked deep reflection on where I want to begin my legal practice. It's important to me that I live somewhere with a strong public interest law community and in a state whose policies align with my personal values. At the same time, I'm compelled to go where my skills will be of greatest service. Regardless of where I move after law school, though, my summer with NWJP convinced me I would thrive in a legal aid nonprofit environment. Legal aid work requires attorneys to be dynamic, creative, and relentless in their commitment to justice. They must be ready and willing to help each other, excel at time management, and, with heavy caseloads and limited resources, be resourceful and self-motivated. Everything I've learned from NWJP's attorneys and my clerk tasks have helped me see my path to public interest law more clearly than before.