



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** Legal Aid Chicago

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**Update 1:** This summer, I am interning at Legal Aid Chicago in the Children and Families Practice Group, and I am very grateful to receive funding from Equal Justice America to help support this internship.

I first became interested in family law through the Family Legal Supports and Advocacy Clinic at the University of Wisconsin. After a year at the clinic helping families with legal issues, I am very excited to have the opportunity to continue working with children and families with Legal Aid Chicago.

Legal Aid Chicago's mission is to provide high quality civil legal aid to people living in poverty and other vulnerable groups, through advocacy, education, collaboration, and litigation. In the Children and Families Department, I will be working in education law and family defense. With the education law team, I will be working in special education rights, appeals, and advocacy for foster children. With the family defense team, I will be helping address child welfare issues, specifically appeals to Department of Children and Family Services findings and family placements. Last week, I had the opportunity to observe a meeting to finalize an Individualized Education Plan for a student with special needs. I look forward to being a part of the team this summer. #EJAFellowUpdate

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**Update 2:** I am now nearly half-way done with my internship at Legal Aid Chicago and it's time for my second #EJAFellowUpdate. Over the last two weeks, I have been reading and summarizing records of Individualized Education Plans and school evaluations. The Legal Aid Chicago education law team works with many special needs students to make sure they are receiving services properly suited for their individual needs. Legal Aid then advocates on the students' behalf if they are not receiving the proper services, or if they need additional services.



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Right now, my work with the education law team is helping to make sure a student gets back services that were cut during Covid. There is still a long journey ahead of us, but for now, that student is heading to school for the first time since the start of the pandemic!

I am learning a lot, not only about education law, but also about the education system in Chicago in general. Last week, I was researching the Chicago Public Schools Code of Conduct and what is or is not an acceptable consequence for students' misbehavior. I have really enjoyed learning more about education law and I look forward to where the second half of my internship will bring me!

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**Update 3:** At Legal Aid Chicago, I am interning with the Family Defense and Preservation team. This includes some work with the Family Law team. Family Defense represents and advises clients in investigations, hearings, and appeals involving DCFS. The Family Law team focuses mainly on divorce and orders of protection. Legal Aid Chicago prioritizes working with survivors of abuse and domestic violence. For many of Legal Aid's clients, a divorce or an order of protection is an important step toward leaving an abusive relationship behind.

Last week I helped complete the necessary documents divorce for a client. This included writing out a Petition for Dissolution of Marriage, gathering any missing information, and filling in the client's information on all the court forms. The client and I then went over the documents together to verify that all the information is correct and to answer any questions she had about the documents. Divorce can be a long process and I likely will not be at Legal Aid when everything is finalized. But I am learning a lot about the process. I am very grateful to Equal Justice America for this opportunity to work with clients, improve my writing skills, and learn about the Illinois court system, while also making a positive impact in people's lives. #EJAFellowUpdate

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**Update 4:** I am now on week 9 of my internship with Legal Aid Chicago and I would like to share my fourth #EJAFellowUpdate.

With the Family Defense team, I have had the opportunity to help prepare for two hearings. Over the past few weeks, I helped my supervisor prepare a response brief for an appeal of an order of protection. We are arguing that the order of protection should stay in place. I conducted research, wrote a memo, and cite checked the brief. The research I did for this brief was one of my first assignments after starting this internship. It is exciting to see everything come together!

The other hearing is an appeal of a DCFS finding. I reviewed the investigative file to help prepare a hearing outline and sat in on several calls with the client. Most of this week has been spent preparing to take the client's testimony at the hearing. DCFS is a government agency so this hearing will be in front of an Administrative Law Judge. Since I took Administrative Law last semester, this experience has helped me build on what I learned in class.



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I am grateful for this opportunity to learn more about the work that goes into court proceedings and to put some of the concepts I learned in class into context.

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**Update 5:** Last week I finished my internship with Legal Aid Chicago. As I reflect on my summer, I would like to share one final #EJAInternUpdate.

I learned so much over the last ten weeks with Legal Aid through my work with the family defense and education law teams. I did not know anything about education law going into this summer, but I have become more interested in it as a result. Legal Aid primarily works to advocate for children with special needs, foster children, and children facing disciplinary action. This work included research on the Illinois School Code and reading through many school and hospital records. My work was very reading-heavy, but it is important and necessary to make sure the students we advocate for are receiving the help they need in school to succeed. Many of our clients just need someone to explain their rights or to give the school a push to get the student proper services. However, I learned this summer that that still requires prep work such as research and memo writing. I am very grateful to be a part of the process of getting kids the help they need in school.

Legal Aid's family defense team works with families who have been indicted by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for child abuse or neglect. Legal Aid steps in when the evidence, or lack of evidence, shows that finding might have been incorrect. Here too a lot of my work went to hearing prep. I watched and summarized several victim sensitive interviews so my supervisor could easily reference them during the hearing. I did the same with a DCFS investigative file for another hearing.

By reading these files I learned a lot about how DCFS and Chicago Public Schools work. I was reminded frequently this summer how much background work must be done before a hearing and sometimes even before giving advice to a client. In order to best serve our clients we must first do the research and read the files. I am so grateful to Legal Aid Chicago and Equal Justice America for giving me this experience!