



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** East Bay Community Law Center

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**Update 1:** I'm now three weeks into my internship at East Bay Community Law Center, and I'm so impressed with the staff, attorneys, and my fellow interns. So many of the people I'm working with have been at EBCLC for many years—it's not a temporary job while you scope something better, it's where you stay.

Working in the Housing Clinic has been eye-opening. As tenants across Alameda County are facing the end of the eviction moratorium, more tenants are about to be uprooted. Oakland and Berkeley residents have already been so impacted by being next to one of the most expensive housing markets in the country, and landlords—and their lawyers--have been pulling the dirtiest tricks to get tenants out. These tenants are parents with young kids, BIPOC, people dealing with serious illnesses, and the elderly. I have witnessed the dedication and determination of the attorneys around me, and I am so grateful to learn from these powerhouses.

Thanks to the Equal Justice America Fellowship, along with the Hastings Public Interest Law Foundation grant, I was able to accept this unpaid summer position. Now, I'm learning the legal intricacies of the most pressing issue in the Bay Area, one that I confront daily going to school in the Tenderloin: affordable housing and homelessness. As our local and state governments fail to address this crisis, attorneys have stepped up to support residents.

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**Update 2:** The June numbers are in and landlords filed at least 800 new eviction suits in Alameda County, so the Housing Clinic at East Bay Community Law Center is BUSY. In the past couple of weeks, I've had the opportunity to file an answer on behalf of a client, draft discovery requests for a mother of two little kids, assist a tenant facing harassment by her property manager, and watch my supervisor fight to save a client's section 8 housing voucher in a hearing. Negotiating up to a 9-month move-out with past rent forgiven felt like an especially big win for a client, and it also proved how little is at stake for landlords when they file these suits, while our clients have everything to lose in a matter of days. All of these experiences highlight how necessary it is for tenants to have a lawyer on their side, and I'm so grateful to learn from the attorneys who do it best.



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The only way to get this kind of applied experience is outside of the classroom, and because funding in our legal system is skewed across sectors, public interest students like me rely on fellowships and grants to make our entries into the profession viable. Please consider donating to Equal Justice America to help next year's cohort pursue the incredible opportunity to become advocates in their community.

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**Update 3:** I had yet another client this past week come in with a horrible story of harassment by their landlord. It's really shocking how often this kind of behavior occurs; it shows that landlords fully believe that they can get away with it, and it also shows how insecure that tenants feel in their rights as tenants, because harassment often goes on for many months if not years before they seek help. I fully believe that landlords simply assume that their tenants will be too timid to take action, and I wish that EBCLC could take on affirmative cases. Even if landlords cease or, more likely diminish, harassment towards the client, I'm sure they often treat other tenants the same way, or will treat future tenants in a similar way. I think it would have more of an impact on their behavior if there it was known that our legal system and city regulatory boards take landlord harassment seriously, and that they have a lot to lose monetarily if they harass their tenant. All these clients want is to live in their home in peace and not have to be stressed or anxious about their landlord's creepiness, rudeness, or pressure to move.

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**Update 4:** I had my first client who was rude last week. He was 25 minutes early to his 9:30am appointment, so I wasn't ready for him. He also hadn't sent us his documents the day before, as requested (even after a couple of reminders), so I also hadn't reviewed his summons and complaint carefully. Intake told him that the appointment would take 2-3 hours, but he asked if we could speed it up. Of course, the appointment had delays—as they always do—so he got frustrated and kept telling me that he shouldn't have come, that he should have hired a lawyer (despite this being a nonpayment case, and him also never saying he had the rent money together now). He asked me if I had ever done this before, and that he thought he'd be able to speak with an attorney and just “get something done fast.” He got progressively angrier until he left to go feed the meter. When he came back, he apologized, but still ended up leaving before our appointment was over, so I finished the paperwork without him.

I stayed calm the whole time and remained gentle with my words. I knew this older man was probably just stressed out about his situation and probably embarrassed to discuss his financial troubles with a young woman. However, I wish I had been a little more stern; I know it's better to air on the kinder side with clients, but I don't think he would have been this way with my male counterparts. I should have been more firm at the beginning to shut down his rudeness; it was a good lesson.

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**Update 5:** I am so lucky to have interned at East Bay Community Law Center. I was not at all expecting such a high level of training, mentorship, and guidance. Attorneys really went out of their way to teach us how the housing practice works; they were all happy to answer our questions and explain the processes that their work



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involves, even if it was not strictly necessary information for the interns. They also put together informal panels to speak with us frankly about topics such as fellowships and movement lawyering, which gave me insight that I would not have learned otherwise.

I still remain in awe at EBCLC as an organization; as the overwhelming majority of lawyers rely on prestige and salary to guide their careers, attorneys at EBCLC are oriented towards serving their clients, a population that is only defined by their lack of resources. While attorneys have oriented each of the clinics to broadly cover the main types of legal problems poor and working people face in the East Bay, no client presents a simple case. Eviction for nonpayment, for instance, is almost never as simple as that; it's often wrapped up other issues such as landlord harassment, habitability issues, or violations of the Alameda County Eviction Moratorium. Or, landlords use other justifications for eviction to side-step what is actually a nonpayment case. They assume that their clients lack the resources to get legal help, and as soon as clients file an answer, it's amazing how quickly most landlords back down and offer a favorable settlement, or delay proceedings because they lack sufficient evidence to bring a winning case to trial. The few cases, however, when landlords (and often their lawyers) are determined to evict tenants, including single mothers with their young children and victims of domestic abuse, reveal how skewed our legal system is in favoring property owners who elect to participate in the housing market for profit. It shows how stressful and difficult the basic necessity of housing has become, and housing impacts every other aspect of life. I would love to see the day when our federal government affirms the right to housing for everyone in this country.