



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Organization:** CHIRLA

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**Update 1:** I am so grateful to be the recipient of an Equal Justice America Summer 2023 Fellowship. This fellowship allows me to spend my summer doing legal work with the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) as part of their Removal Defense Unit.

Immigrants facing deportation do not have the right to an attorney and are not provided legal consultation if they cannot afford it themselves. CHIRLA helps to fill this gap and provides representation to families in need.

Since starting my work with CHIRLA, I have learned so much about removal defense. In particular, I was extremely grateful to participate in CHIRLA's monthly in-person consultation clinic. CHIRLA conducts in-person consultations on the second Saturday of each month. I was inspired by the support CHIRLA was able to give those facing deportation. I was also struck by the huge need there is for services such as those CHIRLA provides, as the clinic had a line of hundreds of immigrants who showed up needing legal support.

I look forward to continuing to provide legal services for those in need. Equal Justice America is a nonprofit that helps fund law students working with vulnerable citizens and people in poverty—increasing the number of future lawyers who have experience doing public interest work and ensuring everyone has access to justice.  
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**Update 2:** Although it has only been about a month, I feel as though I have learned a tremendous amount through my work with CHIRLA. Over the past few weeks, I have been working on several independent research projects. In particular, I continue to be fascinated by the impact that entanglement with law enforcement can have on the immigration process. My work has led me into a deep dive regarding the qualifications an immigrant must meet to obtain cancellation of removal. Cancellation of removal is a special



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type of relief granted to non-U.S. citizens involved in deportation proceedings. People who successfully obtain cancellation of removal can lawfully stay in the U.S., as the immigration judge has canceled their removal from the country. You can qualify for cancellation of removal if you have been a Legal Permanent Resident (Green Card holder) for at least 5 years, have resided in the U.S. for at least 7 years, and have not been convicted of an aggravated felony.

The qualifications seem simple enough. However, there are many ways that an immigrant can break their required 7 year residency period– such as committing certain crimes. For example, residency accrual will stop when one is convicted of, or admits having committed, or admits committing acts which constitute the essential elements of a Crime Involving Moral Turpitude (CIMT). But what exactly is a CIMT? Congress fails to define what constitutes a CIMT in the entirety of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Congress also does not provide a list of offenses considered to be CIMT. Immigrants’ rights attorney, Kara Hartzler writes: “a Crime of Moral Turpitude is a term of art, and it is not always apparent whether it could be met by a conviction under a particular state or local statute... At best lawyers are making a highly educated prediction. At worst they are taking a shot in the dark.” Judges have not been shy in condemning the term, calling CIMT an “invitation to judicial chaos” and an “amorphous morass.” Despite the vague and inconsistent nature of the term, it continues to hold great power in the immigration process. Although I find the intersection of criminal law and immigration to be quite frustrating given its unclear nature, it has also been fascinating to learn about it in greater depth.

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**Update 3:** As I continue my work with the Coalition for Humane Immigrants Rights of Los Angeles, I have been doing more research that underscores just how complicated the U.S. immigration system can be. Although I was a paralegal working in immigration law for 4 years prior to law school and have focused my studies on immigration proceedings, I am constantly taken aback by how much I still don’t know about the system. For example, the U.S immigration system prevents immigrants from obtaining Green Cards if it is believed that they may become a public charge in the United States. In practice, this means that immigrants can be denied a Green Card for not having enough money. The exact laws around the public charge determination are constantly changing, with it often being unclear whether use of certain financial services, such as medicaid or EBT, will result in a public charge determination. The complicated nature of the system underscores the need for all those wrapped up in the U.S. immigration process to have access to legal services.

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**Update 4:** This summer has moved forward so quickly; I can hardly believe my time with CHIRLA is almost at an end. As I work with the entire team, I am moved by the dedication and passion required to stay abreast in a nonprofit legal organization. The office is often overcrowded, as there are not enough workspaces to host all of the staff at once. Furthermore, our office often participates in massive client intake days. During these days, space is hard to come by as all client discussions must be held in private to ensure confidentiality. Despite the hardships and limited space, the attorneys and staff members always seem to make it work. Paralegals give up their workstations so clients can have a private place to speak with attorneys. Meeting rooms are conscientiously



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shared amongst staff members. The innovative thinking that goes into serving clients with limited resources never ceases to impress me. CHIRLA is currently fundraising to get a new work space. This new work space is badly needed, as described above. I am excited to have signed up as a volunteer for the CHIRLA annual gala to assist in these fundraising efforts.

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**Update 5:** I cannot believe that my time with CHIRLA has come to an end. I am endlessly grateful to CHIRLA's wonderful staff who have taught me so much this past summer. In particular, I would like to thank Ms. Crystal Caldera for overseeing my work and taking me under her wing as I learned about removal defense. I was completely new to the field of removal defense when I first started this summer and feel as though I got a crash course education in how immigrant protections operate. I spent my last couple of weeks with CHIRLA working on country condition reports, explaining why certain countries are unsafe for an immigrant to return to. After this summer, I am certain that my future career lies in immigration. I greatly admire the work CHIRLA does for the community and see the huge need there is for immigration services throughout Los Angeles. The U.S. immigration system is a convoluted, confusing mess and as the daughter of an immigrant it is my most fervent desire to see that those trapped within it have access to high quality, affordable legal representation.