



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

### EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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#### Update 1:

During my first few weeks at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), I have learned so much already. As somebody who only has had exposure to criminal law and appellate work, being exposed to other legal services has been interesting. The group I am part of is the Medical Legal Partnership which provides legal services at medical sites to low income communities. One of the sites I am at also helps disabled clients. The services and advice we offer range from immigration to housing to record clearing. The group expands the definition of health from physical health to housing, food, etc. During my first few days I was able to shadow some intakes. I noticed that the intakes were very detailed and sometimes required in-depth explanations. Some of the clients I had the pleasure of helping these last few weeks include housing, benefits, and naturalization. All of which I had very little experience with. Hearing some of the stories shared has been very baffling to me to hear because of all the injustices these people have faced. I learn something new every day and that has been one of the most fulfilling aspects. Being here helps me create new ideas of how I can create and guide my own practice once I graduate.

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#### Update 2:

These last few weeks at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, I have learned more about benefits. This is a topic I had no experience with, but being able to know at least the basics has been very rewarding. During these weeks, one specific client stood out the most to me. This client and his wife came in asking about conservatorship and power of attorney letters. The client has many disabilities that affected his decision making and his wife was the one that made a lot of them. She just wanted to have an official notice because she was turned down by a



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doctor in the past. What was special about this couple was seeing how loving they were. The wife was committed to making sure her husband had everything he needed. And although she had some disabilities herself, she still prioritized him. As I was conducting an intake, they started to get more comfortable. They even called me "Dianita" which is a term of endearment that only my family has called me. We were able to help them with most of their questions and were able to give them the proper referrals for the questions we couldn't. This upcoming week we will be helping them with their advanced directive which will help the wife with making the necessary medical decisions for her husband who is very reliant on her.

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## Update 3:

As we start week 8, I have become more capable in areas of law that I was not familiar with. I can do intakes now with very little help unless the issue is more complex than normal. My issue spotting skills as I'm actively listening have become more sharp. The one on one interactions with our clients have helped me build stronger communication skills as well as learning to be more empathetic than I already am. During the last update I spoke about the couple that we were to help with an advanced directive. Last week on the 1st, we met with them to finalize the paperwork. Although the paperwork was a bit heavy (regarding health and death), we made it through and created a safe space for this couple. It was very fulfilling to do something so impactful. With that advanced directive, the wife will now be able to help her husband make health decisions since his conditions are deteriorating quite quickly. At the end of the process, they both thanked me very much for all the help they received. They also informed us that the referral we sent out for them was already in motion and they had filled out the paperwork already. Not only was I able to impact somebody's life, but I was also able to develop a surface level relationship with our clients in order to make them feel comfortable.

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## Update 4:

Throughout these last few weeks, I had the opportunity to partake in LAFLA's LEIF programming. As part of the fellowship, we had to discuss in detail an issue in our community that could potentially intersect with the workgroup we formed part of. I focused on how the school to prison pipeline is a public health crisis. The school to prison pipeline uses zero tolerance policies that do not give children second chances. But instead push for removal and criminalization. Schools are oftentimes one the only protective factors that children have which means that the policies that are meant to "correct" them are the ones doing the most harm. The issue with the strict policies is that suspending and removing children is that through this they begin to pave the pathway to falling behind in school which can inherently lead to dropping out. Aside from the mental health issues that arise from being criminalized, one needs to take into account the harms it does to one's future employment, benefits, etc. Which is why I viewed it as a public



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health crisis. Since I am part of the medical legal partnership, some recommendations I had were things like a more holistic intake as well as maybe compiling a list of GED programs that are low-cost or even free.

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## **Update 5:**

The last ten weeks at LAFLA have been one of a kind to say the least. Beginning from the staff, attorneys, and clients. At LAFLA everybody leads with one thing in mind, helping the people of Los Angeles. As somebody who grew up here, it is something I wish I saw in so many more because people from these communities really need this help. Getting to work with the advocates at LAFLA was beyond enlightening. I was able to see first hand the people skills they have as well as their empathy. Everybody at LAFLA was not only open to teaching, but also listening to our ideas and contributions. The type of work I did at LAFLA was important and impactful. I had the opportunity to work on a range of areas from immigration to housing. One of the ones that I dedicated a lot of time to was a legal memo for a response to a request for evidence from USCIS. As somebody who did not have much prior knowledge of immigration law, this was a challenge. I was learning about some of the rules and regulations at the same time that I was researching. However, I was able to finish the assignment in a timely manner and even got feedback. This assignment was a learning experience and now is a writing sample. Another thing that LAFLA taught me was how important empathy was. Oftentimes, the narratives were heavy and saddening. Doing legal aid/public interest is also an emotional job that nobody is prepared for. You don't realize the weight you carry until it hits. I had moments where I would think about certain things at home from work because it would just stick. Legal aid is a work of many aspects and it takes strength not only for yourself, but your clients as well. The experience I had at LAFLA only furthered my journey to being an attorney. I learned so many practical skills and areas of law that I did not have experience with. But the aside from work, I also left LAFLA with something very important; another community back home.