



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Alexa Jean-Baptiste
LAW SCHOOL	Fordham University
ORGANIZATION	Advocates for Children of New York

Update 1: My first two weeks at Advocates for Children of New York were an introduction to the organization, its mission, and an immersion into a field of law I was never privy to in my doctrinal courses, education law. Using standards set forth under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Advocates for Children sues the New York City Department of Education on behalf of children whose educational rights are being violated by not being provided with services they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond. Besides this area of law being elucidated to me by the supervising attorneys, one of the most rewarding aspects of this experience thus far has been the opportunity to do fieldwork by canvassing two schools in my second week; the Sterling School in Brooklyn, NY and the Andrus School in Yonkers, NY. Seemingly two opposing environments, the Sterling School specializes in children with dyslexia using the Orton-Gillingham method and is a small school that you may miss as you walk down the streets of Brooklyn. The Andrus School is a large, sprawling campus with a day and residential program for children with emotional disabilities. Visiting these two schools showed me that while a Sterling kid may not be a fit for Andrus and vice versa, there are a myriad of schools that can fit a child's academic, emotional, and intellectual needs.

Update 2: I am currently in my fourth week at Advocates for Children of New York marveling at the amount of information I have learned in such little time. These past weeks I have been balancing attending training sessions held by the organization and getting into the crux of the issues by applying what I have learned. I delved deep into one of our client's case files to draft a special education mediation request because the New York City Department of Education did not provide the client with the services they needed. This was a novel experience for me because I have never drafted work for an administrative hearing. I decided to reach out to another attorney to participate in drafting an opening and closing statement, and a cross examination. I have started the preparation process for this latest assignment by looking into pertinent case law and familiarizing myself with the client's case file. I am nervous yet elated to have an opportunity to speak on the record at an administrative hearing. This will help me train my "advocacy muscle" by building my confidence to speak on behalf of a client. One of the things



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

that has inspired me to take on this project was a meeting I had with the Public Interest Resource Center at my law school before I started the summer internship where the advisor told me, "There is little you can do to 'mess up' a client's case." This has propelled me to step outside of my comfort zone to sign up for this project.

Update 3: I am currently in my seventh week at Advocates for Children of New York moving on to a different aspect of educational law; due process hearings. For over the past week, I have been working with one of the staff attorneys to prepare for an administrative hearing. I have drafted an opening statement, a cross examination, and a closing statement. I have submitted a notice of appearance to the hearing officer presiding over the case. Drafting these documents has permitted me to build my theory of the case and practice my advocacy skills. We are going up against the New York City Department of Education on the contention that they did not provide a disabled child with a Free Appropriate Public Education ("FAPE") nor any of his related services as mandated by statute. This is the first time in my entire law school career I have endeavored to enter a notice of appearance and speak on the record. I am thinking of my professional responsibility professor's quip that entering a notice of appearance for a client is like having a metaphorical "ball and chain" around one's foot. Trying not to appear daunted by the task, I introduced myself and delivered my opening statement. My supervisor was there with me all the while, albeit virtually, to assure me that things would go smoothly. Watching opposing counsel fumble at times helped assuage my fears that I would appear flustered or unprepared. I made objections when necessary and performed a cross examination. This has surely been the most rewarding experience of my summer in public interest.

Update 4: I am currently in my ninth week at Advocates for Children of New York. I have successfully completed my first due process hearing under the supervision of one of the attorneys. The hearing concluded yesterday, and I performed a cross examination of a witness called by the Department of Education and delivered a closing statement. This was both a daunting and rewarding experience as I got to set forth my theory of the case in this matter. I performed legal translation work for a French speaking family that was seeking an appropriate placement for their child, bridging the gap between languages and removing any ambiguity that can often come when utilizing an interpreter. I met with my supervisor for one of our final check-in meetings and reflected on all of the work I completed this summer. I reached out to another attorney who is involved in a Court-Involved Youth project. I did research on schools that could support a formerly incarcerated student who has an IEP. I reached out to multiple schools on behalf of this client. I was interested in working with this client population because over the course of my law school career, I have been made privy to how an individual's background, such as entanglement in the foster care system, can result in their incarceration as an adult.

Update 5: Spending my summer at Advocates for Children of New York working to make sure students' educational needs were being met was such a humbling experience. In my final week, I followed up with a French speaking family who had recently arrived in the United States, performing interpretation work to ensure they were satisfied with their disabled child's placement. I also interpreted for a Haitian Creole speaking client to clarify if their disabled child's needs were being met at their school. I reached out to schools for a formerly incarcerated



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

student who was soon to age out of the system. I relayed all of the pertinent information I had learned to the supervisors on the respective cases. I compiled all of the tasks I completed for the summer into a closing memorandum for the internship coordinators. As I reflected on the work I completed, I thought about how the New York City Department of Education has a myriad of deficiencies that makes it so that organizations like Advocates for Children will never be out of work. Out of all of the practice areas, education law was the one I knew the least about. In fact, I was not even aware that this specialty existed. After witnessing how the New York City Department of Education has repeatedly failed children, particularly disabled children, children of color, formerly incarcerated youth and those in the foster care system, I saw how crucial the role of education advocacy was. In a final lunch meeting with my supervisor, we discussed my future in public interest. I expressed to her how I would like to consider a post-graduate role in becoming an educational advocate in the future. I appreciated how Advocates for Children had different projects depending on the population served. Some attorneys served as heads of those projects, working with immigrant children or court-involved youth. As a Haitian American who was in an English language learners program as a child, I realized how important it was for these students to have attorneys on their behalf fighting vociferously for their rights in due process hearings. I also learned that even when advocating for your client with zeal, you can lean on some of your softer skills to get the desired outcome. Collaborating with the experienced attorneys and fellow interns was a rewarding endeavor. Going into my third and final year of law school, my experience at Advocates for Children is not one I will soon forget.