



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Anna Patton
LAW SCHOOL	Loyola Chicago
ORGANIZATION	Equip for Equality

Update 1: This week marks my third at my summer internship placement: [Equip for Equality](#). Equip is the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy agency for Illinois. As the state's P&A organization, Equip serves people with disabilities through legal advocacy and independent monitoring. I am thrilled to be part of the Special Education Clinic this summer!

Having worked in education for over a decade before applying to law school, I am passionate about all students' ability to access and grow throughout their educational journey. Equip's Special Education Clinic works to ensure this right becomes a reality for all students with disabilities in Illinois.

My first two weeks focused on a variety of training topics including more about Equip as an organization, foundations of federal special education law, and common challenges facing students with disabilities in Illinois. Conducting educational records reviews for possible legal concerns was one of my favorite topics because a student's records set the stage for a child's legal rights and protections. I realize record reviews may not sound exciting, but I love how they make me feel like a detective! I enjoy combing through the seemingly disconnected pieces of data—isolated testing scores, teachers' comments, incident reports, and evaluation results—to put together the larger picture of a student's experiences.

My [EJA Fellow update](#) is possible through financial support from [Equal Justice America](#) Summer Fellowships and the [Loyola University Chicago School of Law Civitas ChildLaw Center](#) Fellowship.

Update 2: It is hard to believe the summer is at the halfway point already, and I cannot be more grateful to EFE for the breadth of opportunities I have already had! Without a doubt, the theme of the last few weeks has been exposure—to new topics, new settings, and new projects. Last week, I was able to observe court for the first time. Aside from serving on jury duty once, I have not spent any time in a courtroom, so the days in court were very impactful. My biggest



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

takeaway is how much waiting occurs in court. From waiting for the room to open to waiting for a specific case to get called, the waiting is pervasive. Waiting makes me anxious in the best of times, so I cannot help but wonder about the psychological toll the amount of waiting takes on the person whose life, future, and freedom are at stake? Who does the waiting serve? Who does the waiting disadvantage? If we are truly going to work for equal justice for all, we must grapple with the distress waiting for justice creates before, during, and after proceedings.

I also had the chance to participate in community education on behalf of one of our organization's partners: New Leaf Illinois. New Leaf provides free legal representation or legal information to people who want their cannabis convictions off their record throughout the whole state. I was floored to learn about the incredibly important work this initiative provides to combat systemic disparities created by the war on drugs. Bonus: I learned the difference between record expungement and record sealing!

Finally, I had the chance to visit our office in-person! In addition to putting faces with email addresses, I checked a Chicago must-see off my bucket list: Cloud Gate aka The Bean! Since our office sits across from the Bean's home in Millennium Park, our offices provide an incredible overlook of this famous sculpture. The Bean has been blocked off renovation for the last year, so it was perfect timing to come to the office the day it was freed!

Update 3: Time seems to be moving at warp speed since my last update; I blinked and now it is July! I have been building my legal writing skills in both English and Spanish this summer. While I love using Spanish for travel and day-to-day interactions around Chicago, I was incredibly nervous about transitioning into legal Spanish. There is so much legal vocabulary I do not know in English—let alone a second language!

My first Spanish-language project was a record review, which felt manageable because I could take my time and check on anything I know before writing or responding. After the records review, I was able to expand my Spanish legal writing skills by drafting a retainer in Spanish. I have even been able to observe bilingual legal meetings including court and mediation. Finally, I have now taken on live helpline intake calls in Spanish. I certainly have plenty of learning and growing left to do in firming up my legal Spanish, but I am so thankful for the support and belief of my fellow team members to take a leap of faith and just try.

Most importantly, I have realized how many additional obstacles to justice for those speak a language other than English. From waiting for an interpreter to arrive at court to rescheduling school meetings because no interpreters are available, the added layers of challenge are daunting, demoralizing, and defeating. In the future, I hope to discover ways to make justice accessible for all—and that must include language access.

Update 4: I had one of my favorite memories of my internship at the end of July: Disability Pride Parade. I had never attended a Disability Pride Parade before this year, and to be honest, I did not even know they existed. The Chicago event took place on Saturday, July 20, and I did not really know what to expect. I got up, got dressed, and headed to the train like normal. It was a very typical morning—all the way down to getting ghosted by the Red Line.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

As I got closer to the Parade sponsor plaza, I started noticing an increasing number of people with mobility aids on the CTA with me. I smiled realizing I didn't feel as lonely as I normally do when I use the accessible seats. My disabilities are invisible, so I tend to get questioning glances or outright stares of disapproval when I sit in designated seating. Parade day hit different. I was met with understanding, empathy, and normalcy. As I exited the train, I got to use the elevator with other people instead of by myself. I began to cry small, happy tears. I carried this joy with me as I cheered on parade participants arriving to the final plaza.

What a beautiful thing. To be in community. To be represented. To be disabled and proud.

Update 5: Today is the last day of 1L Summer Internship with Equip for Equality. While 10 weeks sounded like plenty of time, it flew by in no time once the summer got underway. Although I worked on many impactful projects, the biggest takeaway I have from my internship is the power of relationships. Relationships are the element that raised the experience from great to truly exceptional.

As a member of the Special Education Clinic, I joined an incredible professional team. Professional relationships can serve as a support system. Having mentors and colleagues who understand your goals and challenges can provide moral support and practical advice. They offer guidance during tough times, celebrate your successes, and provide a sounding board for your ideas. I felt the value of the relationships I formed this summer first-hand when a health emergency kept me out of work for two weeks.

Without missing a beat, my supervising attorney covered my upcoming responsibilities and made sure I was focused on my health and wellbeing. Rather than guilt for my absence, the team immediately responded with care, compassion, and concern. Additionally, team members continued to check-in with me over my recovery period. The clinic team's reaction reminded me that when you embrace the opportunity to connect with others, you'll find that the benefits extend far beyond the duration of your internship. Indeed, I had such a transformative experience that I will be staying onboard through the fall semester!

By continuing into the semester, I am looking forward to building on the work I started this summer. I am particularly interested in staying on cases for which I produced written products including mediation demand letters or records reviews. I am also excited to continue research on accessible education law in Illinois ensuring meaningful participation through interpreters for parents and families who speak languages other than English. And finally, I look forward to maintaining the relationships with clients I established over the last two and a half months. I am grateful for the work and funding support from [Equal Justice America](#) as well as the [Loyola University Chicago School of Law Civitas ChildLaw Center](#) that makes this [EJA Fellow update](#) possible!