



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

## EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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<b>LAW SCHOOL</b>	NYU Law
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Manhattan Legal Services

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### Update 1:

This summer I am working as a legal intern at Legal Services NYC in their Manhattan family law/domestic violence unit. My internship was made possible in part by a generous fellowship award by Equal Justice America, which provides opportunities to law students to work with organizations that deliver civil legal services to those most in need. As part of the award, I will be posting periodic updates regarding the work I am doing throughout the summer.

During the first week of orientation, we had the privilege of visiting the Tenement Museum in the Lower East Side. We learned about the stories of Jewish and Italian immigrant families, and the challenges that low-income immigrant families faced during the first half of the 20th century, including poor workplace conditions and low wages as well as inadequate and crowded housing. We also discussed the difficulty that low-income immigrants faced in accessing public benefits and the dilemma of assimilation versus maintaining one's culture and heritage.

While progress has been made, many similar problems continue to burden low-income individuals today, including barriers to access public assistance, widespread housing insecurity, substandard working conditions, and meager wages. These problems are further exacerbated for survivors of domestic violence, who must also navigate ensuring their own safety and the safety of their children, all while healing from trauma.

I am honored to be using my legal skills and trauma-informed training this summer to support low-income individuals and to make the complex and often unjust legal system, a little bit easier to navigate.



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## **Update 2:**

As part of my internship at Legal Services NYC (LSNYC) in their Manhattan domestic violence/family law unit, I work with and hear many stories about clients who have experienced extensive trauma. LSNYC has an interdisciplinary approach to supporting their clients, in which both attorneys and social workers collaborate to ensure the best legal outcomes for those who seek assistance. This integrative method between attorneys and social workers ensures that clients can most effectively participate in the legal process, which is lengthy, complex, and oftentimes retraumatizing.

Today our intern program was privileged to attend a presentation by Eleise Smith-Menjivar, a social worker in the Manhattan family law unit who shared her insights about working with clients who have experienced trauma and/or have mental health needs. Eleise shared some helpful strategies for working with clients who are struggling with their mental health, including encouraging clients to breathe and engage in grounding exercises such as rubbing their hands together and pushing their heels into the ground, as well as checking in with clients throughout meetings to ensure their needs are met.

Eleise emphasized the need for attorneys and legal support staff to exercise self-care since it is impossible to best support your clients without taking care of yourself. For me, going on long walks and talking with coworkers is helpful for processing difficult and dark cases. I am very thankful for the supportive and collaborative nature of the LSNYC Manhattan family law team, which I believe is crucial for doing work with those who have experienced trauma.

I am looking forward to continuing this important work throughout the rest of my time at LSNYC and updating my network about my experience!

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## **Update 3:**

During my internship at Legal Services NYC, I had the opportunity to draft questions for the direct examination of my client. I spent hours learning about the rules of evidence and trying to anticipate which type of questions would garner objections.

I was then able to see these questions used during an in-person trial. It was fascinating to see my supervisor use the questions I drafted as well as veer off script when it made sense to do so. This experience taught me so much about client prep, strategic question drafting, and the need to think on your feet during questioning.

Of particular note, our client only spoke Spanish which added a level of complexity to the examination. While the court provided interpreters, a total of five interpreters cycled in and out



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over the course of the two-hour examination. This was extremely disruptive to the examination, as different interpreters were more familiar with certain country-specific slang than others and each time the interpreters switched it led to misunderstandings. This experience exemplified one of the many barriers non-native English speakers experience when engaging the justice system. Providing interpreters is only the first step to combatting these difficulties, as it is equally important to ensure that interpretation services are culturally competent and delivered in as smooth of a manner as possible.

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## **Update 4:**

At Legal Services NYC, I have been privileged to work on a range of substantive projects.

One of my most extensive projects as an intern has been drafting a summation for a contentious custody case. This project involved extensive research on the standard for modification of a custody order, summarizing six days of testimony and multiple exhibits, and making the case that our client has met her burden and opposing counsel has not. I have learned the difficulties in succinctly summarizing a large record as well as the rewarding nature of piecing together every element of a case into a coherent and persuasive argument. As I wrap up my internship, I am looking forward to incorporating feedback from my supervisors as well as honing and tightening the summation.

I am so appreciative of my supervisors in trusting me with this project, as it has been a fruitful exercise in persuasive legal writing and research.

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## **Update 5:**

Before my second year of law school begins, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on my experience as a summer intern at Legal Services NYC (LSNYC). As I have shared during my periodic summer updates, I have learned a great deal about serving low-income clients who have experienced trauma, expanded my legal writing and researching skills, and gained extensive exposure to litigation in the family law context. For my final update, I wanted to specifically highlight my thanks to the small-knight family law team at LSNYC's Manhattan office, who I was lucky enough to learn from and work with this summer. I was so impressed by the Family Law Unit on all fronts: from its collaborative nature to its relentless advocacy for its clients and commitment to uplifting the lives of domestic violence survivors and low-income New Yorkers. While DV survivors face so many barriers in moving forward, I am comforted in knowing that such a compassionate and hardworking team is supporting survivors through this difficult journey.

This summer solidified and only strengthened my desire to continue a career in public interest supporting and uplifting marginalized communities. This fall, I am looking forward to continuing



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my work supporting survivors of domestic violence and building on my experience at LSNYC in my role as the volunteer coordinator for the gender violence advocacy project at NYU Law and through classes taught by experts in the field of family law and domestic violence.

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