



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

### EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



<b>NAME</b>	Morgan Awner
<b>LAW SCHOOL</b>	New York University School of Law
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Brooklyn Defender Services

**Update 1:** This summer, I am excited to be working as a Legal Intern in the Family Defense Practice at Brooklyn Defender Services, funded in part by Equal Justice America. Brooklyn Defender Services is a public defense office that provides representation and advocacy to people facing loss of freedom, family separation and other serious legal harms. Once in court, families often face prolonged family separation and years of supervision by the Administration for Children's Services. The Family Defense Practice specifically works with clients in family court to keep families together or reunify families as soon as possible when separation occurs.

**Update 2:** It has been a busy few weeks in family court. Since my last update, I have continued to work in support of the attorneys and social workers at Brooklyn Defender Services. The work has included drafting motions, writing summaries of client's cases for a potential lawsuit, meeting with clients, and observing various hearings. I have also now had the opportunity to shadow intake, a chaotic process that happens every Monday through Friday when the government files petitions against families and they first appear in court. Often, when BDS attorneys call clients, they are the first ones to inform clients that the government is filing a neglect petition against their family.

**Update 3:** I cannot believe I am already halfway through my summer at Brooklyn Defenders! Last week, I was able to observe night arraignments in criminal court and shadow many of the criminal defense practice attorneys. At Brooklyn Defenders, they have a practice titled "Integrated Defense Practice" where lawyers work with clients on their cases in criminal and family court. Currently, I am working on preparing for a termination of parental rights trial. These cases are very difficult, often the family has been embroiled in the family policing system for many years. Instead of providing services and solutions for these families, the state moves cases along towards termination, to "free up" children for adoption. Once a parent's rights are terminated by the court, the court has no power to order visitation between the parent and their child. Brooklyn Defender Services is supporting a bill in the NYS Assembly, the Preserving Family



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Bonds Act, which would allow courts to order visitation between parents and children even after termination proceedings. This will allow families to continue contact even after the court has legally terminated their parental rights and allowed their children to be adopted.

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**Update 4:** I only have three weeks left at Brooklyn Defenders! This week, I had a trial that I had been working on for over a month at the internship. It was exciting to be able to work closely with the attorney on the prep, including drafting the cross examinations and the summations. I am also observing a hearing that involves ICWA (the Indian Child Welfare Act), which is rare to see in NYC family court. The biggest thing I have learned in the past two weeks is the different Judges in Family Court, and how each Judge operates with their own preferences.

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**Update 5:** I have finished my internship at Brooklyn Defender Services, Family Defense Practice as an Equal Justice America fellow. I am grateful for everyone at BDS and EJA who helped make this summer possible, specifically my amazing supervisors, Heather Stoloff, Krystle Salvati, and Adam Schmelkin. The work the Family Defense Practice does is so important, and it was inspiring to work alongside the attorneys, social workers, and paralegals who are so passionate about the work they do. The most impactful part of my internship by far was working directly with the clients. I am inspired by the resilience they continue to have in the face of an oppressive and punitive system.

In the last part of my internship, I was able to work closely with a client to vacate her findings of neglect. Meeting with her to work on her affidavit was incredibly emotional, as her case had originated with the tragic death of her daughter. I had been nervous to meet with her, as the motion required us delving into the details of her case that I knew would be incredibly painful to relive. It was clear from the moment I met her how much pain this case had caused her, and how much work she had done to move her family past this tragedy. I was grateful to have a small role in the hopeful end of her family court involvement.

This experience at FDP has reinforced my desire to work in family defense. At FDP this summer, I saw how the family policing state operates at the intersection of racial, economic, and disability oppression. Being at the place that helped start a movement of providing client-centered family defense across the country was inspiring and motivating to me how far the practice still must go. I feel motivated to continue this zealous client advocacy while also addressing the broader system violence that is the family policing state, to ensure more families stay together and receive outstanding representation and support. I am excited to continue working with FDP as a clinic student at NYU and feel grateful that the connections I made with the staff at FDP will continue long past this internship. Thank you again to Equal Justice America for sponsoring my summer at Brooklyn Defender Services.