



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Mary Moore
LAW SCHOOL	St. Mary's University School of Law
ORGANIZATION	American Gateways

Update 1: This summer, I have the chance to work as a Legal Intern at American Gateways in San Antonio, Texas. I feel extremely grateful that my work is supported by both a St. Mary's Public Service Fellowship and an Equal Justice America Fellowship.

According to Equal Justice America, the need for civil legal aid is urgent because 80% of those living in poverty who require civil legal services do not have access to them. Over the course of ten weeks, I will see what that disparity means for individuals and families seeking protection from deportation or other immigration benefits in Central Texas, and I will document my journey here to shed light on American Gateways' mission.

In the short period of time I have worked at American Gateways, I have observed the Legal Orientation Program provided weekly to those detained at the South Texas ICE Processing Center; I have observed immigration court hearings for non-detained respondents; I have assisted individuals in filling out fee waivers to submit along with their naturalization applications; and I have worked alongside staff members to understand the implications of President Biden's latest executive order. My greatest takeaway so far is that this area of the law is tremendously dynamic and complex. My own struggle to understand the laws, procedures, and forms after a year of law school gives me greater empathy for those who must do the same before representing themselves in court, where the stakes are high, and the language and proceedings are unfamiliar.

Update 2: Since I last posted here, I have been busy trying to keep up at American Gateways! As I mentioned before, immigration law is tremendously dynamic and complex, and I have noticed that no two cases are exactly alike. What starts off as a simple consultation to fill out a fee waiver request or to file a motion to reopen a case takes all kinds of twists and turns as the client discloses more and more information. Thankfully, some of the great parts about working at American Gateways are the open-door policy, the access to learning materials, and the weekly



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

legal meeting, where staff members put their heads together and try to answer novel questions about each other's pending cases.

Here are just a few of the tasks that have challenged me and kept me engaged in the past two weeks:

- Translating witness declarations from Spanish to English to be used as evidence in support of a client's asylum claim at his upcoming trial
- Assisting an excited client in filling out a fee waiver request to submit along with her naturalization application
- Filing a motion to reopen a case for a man who received an *in-absentia* deportation order because he appeared at his hearing virtually when really he needed to appear in person
- Assisting a client in filling out an application to renew her Lawful Permanent Resident Card after her documents were stolen in a women's shelter

Thank you again for following along, and I will write with another update soon!

Update 3: For this week's update, I thought I would describe one case more in depth to give my faithful followers a better idea about what the course of a person's immigration proceedings might look like – something about which I knew very little before beginning my summer internship at American Gateways. But then, I met a man during a visit to a detention center who I cannot stop thinking about. He attended what we call Individual Orientation, a service that American Gateways provides to detained individuals multiple times per week. During Individual Orientation, a staff member asks a person general questions about their case and provides general information that might help that person represent themselves going forward. This particular man spoke Spanish and shared his entire story. I left the visit feeling helpless and guilty until I confided in my supervising attorney. Without missing a beat, she rattled off ways I could keep track of his case and even contact him to offer further support. She then reminded me of the importance of having a confidante in this work and of setting boundaries, even when it means skipping the next visit to Pearsall.

I continue to feel grateful for the opportunity to work at American Gateways, to learn from such wonderful professionals, and to share my experience here with you.

Update 4: When I drive around San Antonio, I always listen to my local NPR station (Texas Public Radio), and I especially love when I hear a story that connects to something I am studying in school or experiencing in my personal life. Last week, I heard a story that reminded me about the mission of Equal Justice America and American Gateways. The Chief Justice of the Texas Supreme Court went before the Senate Judiciary Committee to discuss the dire need for civil legal services. You can listen to the full story or read the full report here:

<https://www.tpr.org/criminal-justice/2024-07-10/chief-justice-of-the-texas-supreme-court-discusses-civil-justice-gap-at-senate-judiciary-committee>.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

In immigration proceedings, one of the rights detained and non-detained individuals have is the right to counsel. However, that does not mean that counsel will be provided for them by the government. Rather, the cost will be borne by the noncitizen in proceedings should they choose to hire a lawyer, or, in the rare case, an organization or law firm will provide pro bono representation.

According to a study conducted by the American Immigration Council, “the lack of appointed counsel may have a profound impact on immigrants’ ability to receive a fair hearing.” I have seen this impact play out during my time at American Gateways in the following ways:

- Based on what I have seen at American Gateways, it appears detained individuals have a more difficult time accessing counsel for a number of reasons. They have limited access to communication with the outside world, they often rely on friends and family to facilitate the process of hiring and paying counsel, and they are subject to faster proceedings than their non-detained counterparts.
- According to the National Immigrant Justice Center, “legal counsel not only ensures that immigrants receive meaningful hearings, but makes immigration court proceedings more efficient.” This rings true at immigration court. There, I saw judges save complicated questions or cases for the days when American Gateways hosted its helpdesk at the court so that staff members could assist respondents in getting organized and understanding the process to make their time in the courtroom run more smoothly.
- As I round the corner on my final week at my internship, I keep remembering how overwhelmed and confused I felt at the beginning as I tried to understand the immigration system. I feel immense empathy for noncitizens trying to do so when forms, proceedings, and information are not in their native language and when the stakes are much higher. Having a lawyer on one’s side can greatly reduce the barriers to success in immigration proceedings.

Sources:

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/access-counsel-immigration-court>
<https://immigrantjustice.org/issues/access-counsel>

Update 5: This post marks the end of my commitment to Equal Justice America, which has been one of the sources funding my work this summer and the motivation behind these biweekly updates. It also marks the end of my ten-week internship at American Gateways. I cannot say enough wonderful things about my time at the organization, but I will list a few highlights below.

- The chance to work in a dynamic, collaborative, mission-driven environment.
- The chance to get a firsthand glimpse at how the immigration system functions in this country.
- The chance to hear the stories of detained and non-detained individuals from various backgrounds.
- The chance to learn from exceptional advocates, attorneys and staff members alike.

Because the demand for immigration legal assistance is so great, American Gateways offers an array of services ranging from the Legal Orientation Program and legal clinics (educating large



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

groups individuals so they can better represent themselves) to direct representation (taking on a client's case from start to finish). Some of my favorite moments in all of this happened during our weekly trips to the detention centers. While incredibly difficult for a variety of reasons you can probably imagine, I valued every trip to Pearsall or Karnes – the hour-long car ride with AG staff members and interns, the presentation provided to a room full of resilient listeners, the opportunity to put what I learned to use in one-on-one conversations with individuals about their situations. These visits put my immigration knowledge and Spanish skills to the test.

I want to give a special shoutout to Laura and Elisa, who dedicated countless hours over the summer to helping me learn and grow and who modeled for me the kind of lawyer I aspire to be in the future. The whole team at American Gateways San Antonio deserves mil kudos for all their victories ✨❤️👏

Wherever law school takes me next, I will cherish the experience I had this summer. I hope my posts have offered a different perspective on immigration law and maybe even taught you something new you did not know before. Thank you for your time.

