



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

## EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



<b>NAME</b>	Jake Lemler
<b>LAW SCHOOL</b>	University of Chicago School of Law
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Equip for Equality: Special Education Clinic

**Update 1:** So far, I have learned special education has been a niche but extremely powerful area of the law. Much of the first few weeks at Equip for Equality has been spent learning and training, but for good reasons. Special education as an area affords attorneys and parents lots of powers, but in order to be an effective advocate you have to know how to use those powers. On the other side I have seen how sometimes school districts do not always have the students' best interests in mind, which is where we come in. It can be extremely frustrating when it is noticeably clear a kid needs help, all the doctors say this kid needs help, the parents are begging for help, yet still the school district refuses. However, it makes me excited to see that this is not the end of the line, and that organizations like the one I am working for help solve these issues.

In particular it has been interesting to get a glimpse of the juvenile detention system. Hundreds of kids are locked up not knowing when they will get out and not getting the educational resources they need to be on par with their peers once they are released. This just causes and perpetuates cycles of poverty and crime, damning the majority of kids just after their first police contact. Fighting for these kids to have access to resources to give them opportunities once they are on the outside is vital.

**Update 2:** For the first time I met with a client being held in temporary juvenile detention. This was a client with obvious special needs but who due to covid was never able to be evaluated. This lack of evaluation has caused so many issues and is one of the primary reasons why the client is currently in legal trouble. This is a 13-year-old who just wants to be home with his family for his birthday, so to have to tell him that is unlikely has been so hard. But it has also been so rewarding to be his point of contact, his person, while he is on the inside. Needing to make sure he takes care of his own mental health and keeps hope is almost a full-time job but one I am excited for. Additionally, I will be attending his court hearings next week, and while it is



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unlikely he will have a positive result I believe it is important for him to see a friendly face when he walks into the courtroom. I hope beyond hope that by the time my summer is over he will be home, but we will have to see.

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**Update 3:** This week I made my first big mistake, well big to me. It did not affect a case and there are no real ramifications, but I did unfortunately give incorrect advice to a parent. When I gave the advice, I thought it was correct but after speaking with my supervising attorney I realized that it was not. Luckily, I was able to quickly remedy the situation and provide the correct information to the parent. Despite this mistake it was a great learning experience. Attorneys, even seasoned ones, will make mistakes. The law is large, complex, and ever changing so it is just unreasonable as a future attorney to not make mistakes. What is important is how you respond to the mistake. Here I was able to learn that by quickly apologizing and correcting a mistake clients will understand. What gets people in trouble is trying to hide the mistake and refusing to acknowledge they may be wrong. If in the future this were to happen again, I am confident I know how to correct mistakes and work with clients to mitigate their harm.

In other news I am preparing a client for court next week. I am not working directly on his criminal case but am trying to keep his spirits up and help him prepare mentally for what might happen. I am hoping my next update will have a more positive outcome for him, but unfortunately that is not what we expect and what I have been preparing him for.

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**Update 4:** Starting to work on more systemic cases has been an interesting change of pace. Instead of working for an individual client I am now looking at a larger issue, but one that is much harder to prove. Instead of relying on firsthand accounts and known individual records we need to wade through a sea of data and perspectives to prove our case. But with this comes research on how this particular systemic issue affects students. I had known before, just by common sense, that what was happening was not okay, but I would not have been able to show exactly why. Understanding these affects and why we are working so hard to prevent makes me appreciate the work I am doing even more. This is part of the reason why I have chosen to continue working with the organization through the remainder of the school year. With EFE I have found a passion for disability rights and making sure every student has an adequate and appropriate education. I am excited to continue my work and continue to grow both as a person and as an advocate.

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**Update 5:** My summer ended as it started, with my young client still behind bars, but this time he had the great opportunity to spend his birthday still locked up. This experience has taught me one very important lesson, the wheels of justice turn very different speeds for different people. But I have loved my time helping my client. At this point, the juvenile corrections staff recognize me, and the supervisor has a deck of cards ready for when I visit. I have found that my



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job goes well beyond just simply trying to get him the best legal outcome, but also to function as an advisor, a counselor, and a friend. The most valuable thing one of these kids can have been a person they trust, and to be that person has been an invaluable experience. In fact, because of this experience I have decided to keep working with Equip in a volunteer capacity for the upcoming school year as well as applying to my school's juvenile justice clinic.

This summer has also taught me a lot about how to collaborate with clients. Often when a client needed an intake they had a really emotional story and absolutely needed help, but the tough part is they are not trained to separate the emotional issues from the legal ones, so my main job is to listen to them but to also pull out the legal claims from a wider story. This has helped not only my issue spotting but also my approach to novel legal issues. I have also learned how to tell a client no. Sometimes clients have unreasonable expectations, or, particularly in the case of able bodied and neurotypical parents with a disabled child, they want something their child does not. In these moments it is important for me to come from a place of understanding instead of disagreement. Clients understand that we are the experts in this situation, but understanding why they want what they want, even if it is something I cannot help with, goes a long way into keeping a good relationship and actually advancing a case forward.

Overall, the most important thing I have learned this summer is the power of a bar card. The ability to represent someone can make a huge difference. The ability for a lawyer to get education for a child, prevent discrimination, and even prevent abuse of power by the state cannot be overstated. When I am lucky enough to have one of these cards this experience has shown me its power, and how I can use mine to best help society and the most vulnerable people within.