



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

## EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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<b>LAW SCHOOL</b>	University of Texas School of Law
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Texas Defender Service

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**Update 1:** I am pleased to share that I have joined Texas Defender Service as a Law Clerk this summer. Texas Defender Service seeks to end mass incarceration and excessive punishment in Texas through direct representation, policy reform, and public education.

After completing my first year at the University of Texas School of Law, it has been thrilling to dive into real-life legal work yet also difficult to observe some of the harsh realities of the criminal legal system.

During my first week, I got a crash course on the complex procedure of capital murder cases in Texas, I drafted motions for use in direct representation of clients facing the death penalty and conducted research to learn more about the history of death penalty cases in Texas.

I have so much respect for the attorneys and mitigation staff at TDS who are dedicated to defending those who society has largely written off as unworthy. The humanity and resilience of these advocates has inspired me immensely.

I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity to develop my legal skills and explore mechanisms for much-needed change in the criminal legal system.

I am also grateful for Equal Justice America's support in making my work possible.

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**Update 2:** I have learned so much over the past few weeks as a law clerk at Texas Defender Service (TDS).

With a heavy heart, I invite you to view this video to learn about an incredibly inspiring human being, TDS's client Ramiro Gonzalez, who was unfortunately executed last week:

<https://lnkd.in/g2i287WJ>



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On the first day of my internship, I had the privilege of witnessing the moving story of Ramiro's transformation on death row and his path to seeking redemption. It is difficult to put into words my awe and respect for the folks at TDS who have been working so hard on his behalf and gracefully bearing the devastation of this moment.

I have also had the opportunity to conduct legal research regarding intriguing areas of the criminal legal system such as the dangers of jailhouse informant testimony, and the wave of exonerations occurring due to scientific advancements like more accurate DNA testing— both important topics to understanding wrongful convictions in the US.

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**Update 3:** This summer, I am learning so much as a law clerk at Texas Defender Service (TDS), an organization that seeks to end mass incarceration and excessive punishment in Texas through direct representation, policy reform, and public education.

I had no idea that Harris County is considered the death penalty capital of the world. The systemic racial biases in the pursuit of death sentences in Harris County is disturbing and shocking. Of the last 21 individuals sentenced to death in Harris County, 20 of them, or 95%, have been people of color.

To learn more, check out TDS's new report, "Arbitrary and Capricious: Examining Racial Disparities in Harris County's Pursuit of Death Sentences": [https://www.texasdefender.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/TDS-Harris-County-Report-2024\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.texasdefender.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/TDS-Harris-County-Report-2024_WEB.pdf)

I have also learned about various aspects of capital punishment in the US including jury selection for capital murder trials and the claims one can bring to challenge forms of discrimination that may occur in that process.

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**Update 4:** These past few weeks as a law clerk at Texas Defender Service have been incredible! Texas Defender Service seeks to end mass incarceration and excessive punishment in Texas through direct representation, policy reform, and public education.

I have had the opportunity to engage in field investigation work in collaboration with mitigation and legal staff and learned so much.

Mitigation involves finding evidence about a client's background and upbringing that can display the hardships that the client faced that may have led them to committing the offense they were charged for.

Mitigation is such a critical field in the world of criminal defense, and it is even more important in capital cases where it is thankfully required to be considered by the jury during sentencing.

I have also enjoyed researching Houston law enforcement's relationship with minority communities and historical incidents of racial discrimination that highlight the importance of combating the injustices that are still present today.



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**Update 5:** Reflecting on my last week as a law clerk at Texas Defender Service has been bittersweet. This summer has been nothing short of transformative and eye-opening, providing me with invaluable experience and insight into the world of criminal defense.

I have significantly honed my skills in legal research and writing during this experience. My work over the past few weeks has involved conducting legal research on juror misconduct and strategies to preserve error at trial. I also drafted and revised motions to uphold the constitutional rights of criminal defendants.

Furthermore, one of my favorite parts of this experience was getting to know clients' stories and the way TDS utilizes the power of storytelling to advocate for clients. Last week I was able to accompany an attorney to visit a client in prison to get to know the client and learn their story in order to help them obtain parole. As my second time visiting a client in prison, this experience was very impactful. It exposed me to the realities of mass incarceration and built my confidence with speaking to clients.

I have also witnessed firsthand how the legal system often reduces individuals to just the allegations against them, failing to view them holistically as multifaceted human beings. I deeply appreciate TDS's work to combat this system and seek a more compassionate and just approach that considers the full complexity of every individual's story and circumstances.

I am incredibly thankful for all the remarkable people I had the opportunity to work with. I'd like to thank my supervisor Kevin Trahan, for his invaluable mentorship and guidance. I also want to thank Nicole Ramos for teaching me so much about mitigation work and its significance.

It is wonderful to have had the chance to learn about the important work of TDS. I look forward to carrying these lessons with me in my future endeavors. This experience will undoubtedly enrich my path forward, providing valuable insights and perspectives that will guide my decisions and career path.

I am grateful for The University of Texas School of Law and Equal Justice America's support in making my work possible.