



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

## EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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**Update 1:** Yesterday, my supervisor and I were going through my task list. I had made progress on every task except for one—I hadn't been able to reach a client we were hoping to assist with cash aid. They hadn't returned our calls or mailed back any documents. We had attempted to communicate with this client many more times than usual, and I had given up hope. My supervisor, however, was still hopeful. So, during our supervision meeting, as he was going to tell me I could move on, he suddenly said, "Let's give them a try one more time right now. They probably won't answer, but you never know!" Within a couple of rings, the client excitedly answers, "Mr. Trey! You called me back!" I can only describe the feeling like buying a \$2 scratcher and winning enough to cover your gas bill. This isn't an endorsement for gambling but an analogy I think of to describe anti-poverty work. As an advocate, you hope you're lucky enough to have a client for whom you can obtain favorable outcomes. As a client, you hope you're fortunate enough to have an advocate committed to seeing you through. Combined, you hope that's the last scratcher you'll need to buy.

**Update 2:** I've been assigned a handful of cases this week that need me to complete a Social Security questionnaire. The questionnaire is used to support other evidence that our client is disabled and should qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. I get pretty nervous when I have to call clients to complete these interviews. The questions are invasive and can be offensive. For example, one question asks an applicant to describe issues they have using the toilet. Another asks if they've noticed any unusual behaviors or fears. Before completing my first one I asked a couple paralegals and attorneys how they're able to get detailed answers for questions that are very personal. They explained that the questions are really asking how an applicant isn't "normative" anymore. One of them said, "The normative person doesn't exist. We all do things differently. We just become used to them and they become normative specific to us." That got me thinking of ways I've adjusted my own functions that deviates from the "norm." I have hand tremors as a medication side effect. I've had them for years but I don't think about it at all anymore. I usually tip bowls of soup or cereal into my mouth rather than using a spoon because I'll spill everything if I don't. I've been mentioning this every time I'm complete one of



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these interviews and it usually gets a client to open up about changes they've made since their conditions began. It's led to some very touching moments and pretty compelling reports. Each time I finish an interview I start to see how being vulnerable with clients versus pretending to be infallible creates greater rapport and improved advocacy. It's something I never would've considered before this internship and I'm grateful to my colleagues for integrating that into my practice.

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**Update 3:** My mom raised my sister and I as a single parent. She came to this country as an asylee from El Salvador sometime in the late 80s. She stopped going to school when she was in third grade so she could work on a sugarcane plantation and support her family. I've been thinking about this a lot because I've been assisting asylees from all over the world, but mainly from Latin America, apply for public assistance. One is in the same position my mom was in 35 years ago. She's here with two kids, doesn't speak English, but is doing everything she can to care for her children and protect them from seeing the challenging position they're in. To say that I'm devastated is an understatement. You probably think I will say that speaking to these clients motivates me. It does, but my motivation is fueled solely by spite and resentment towards my country. I don't know that these are healthy motivators in the long run. I've tried to reach out to some colleagues, but this is where lack of diversity impacts the workforce. There's hardly anyone with an immigrant background like mine. What do I do? This entry doesn't have a happy ending, but it's honest, and I wonder if hearing more stories like this can move the needle. I hope so.

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**Update 4:** For this entry, I'd like to focus on the invaluable work of support staff in a legal aid office. I'm talking about paralegals, legal secretaries, screeners, and office and administrative support. There's no way I could've been as successful as I was as an intern and made such an impression without the help and mentorship of non-attorney staff. Before going to law school, I was a paralegal at a legal aid and was excited when new interns would arrive at our office. They were new people eager to learn and become better, sharper advocates who were grateful for any insights. Now, on the other side of the table, it really warmed my heart to see and experience that same generosity and patience from the non-attorney staff at Legal Aid Chicago. This summer, I delved into new areas of practice I'd never experienced, such as cash aid, SNAP, and SSI/SSDI. These client intakes and follow-up calls required asking some deeply personal and emotional questions I'd never had to navigate before. I was scared and felt beyond incompetent. Yet, the paralegal team at Legal Aid Chicago gave me every pro tip they had and comforted me when I thought I had done something wrong. Truly, without the support of Emerson Toomey, James Deere, and Office Support, I would not have grown and matured as an advocate this summer. I'll always be grateful for their patience and guidance.

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**Update 5:** This summer has been beyond challenging for me. My internship has asked me to confront professional fears I've had for a long time, such as conducting client interviews, writing reports, speaking up for myself, and being vulnerable. I made it a goal to challenge as many of my fears as possible this summer, and I believe I've started overcoming many of them. However, I don't think that's possible without the tremendous support I received from my supervisor, Trey Daly. Making significant changes like these is only possible when you've got support, and I've been fortunate to have Trey's support all summer. Under his mentorship, I've gained greater



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confidence in myself and a drive to represent my clients to the best of my ability. This summer, I interviewed a client who is around my age and suffers from chronic suicidal thoughts. Her thoughts are so loud and vivid that she often can't think of anything else. I'm ashamed to say that I wanted to quit on this client. Not because of anything she did but because I felt I didn't have the skills to help her successfully. By observing how my supervisor managed his client calls, I incorporated his style into my client interviews. It was beyond effective. With some adjustments, I made it my own, and each interview started getting easier and easier to do. Ultimately, I completed my work for this client, and we believe Social Security will likely grant her disability claim.

Overcoming these insecurities this summer has made me a stronger and more eager advocate. I know I'll seek public interest jobs after graduation because of this summer experience, and I have to thank EJA's financial support for making that happen. Without EJA, there's no way I could've accepted this position, and there's no way I would've committed myself to public service like this. Much of my journey through law school has been isolating and demoralizing, but thanks to my internship this summer, I have what I need to continue and get started with a public interest career. Thank you!