



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Paola Berumen
LAW SCHOOL	UC Law SF (formerly UC Hastings)
ORGANIZATION	Open Door Legal

Update 1:

I am so excited to be an Equal Justice America Fellow while on the immigration team [Open Door Legal](#). During my time at Open Door Legal, I will assist Fabiano Valerio, the head immigration attorney, assist clients with their T-visa, U-visa, Special Immigrant Juvenile applications (SIJS), and asylum cases. Open Door Legal is like a "general hospital" for people's legal issues and believes the law belongs to all of us. In the past ten years that ODL has been operating in SF, they have achieved many accomplishments like reducing homelessness in Bayview by 46%. I am so honored to be a part of an organization that truly embodies the act of putting community members and their needs first.

This summer I aim to improve my client outreach skills and to learn more about the different forms of legal status immigrants can apply for. I will also assist Fabiano in researching how to take on Unaccompanied Children and their SIJS cases. I will find solutions to combat obstacles, such as writing binding retainer agreements with children. I will also draft a retainer agreement that is accessible to non-English-speaking clients.

Thanks to Equal Justice America I can fund my summer and complete such rewarding work. If you would like to support me in my learning experience, and other students who are dedicated to serving marginalized communities you can visit the EJA fundraiser link:

<https://lnkd.in/g/hFCTucf>



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Update 2:

Recently while working at [Open Door Legal](#), I have been learning about different forms of relief immigrants can apply to like the T-visas, U-visas, and Special Immigrant Juvenile applications. I've learned not only about the qualifying factors needed to apply to each respective status but also about the differences between them. For example, T-visas are for immigrants that are victims of human trafficking and U-visas are for victims of criminal activity that occurred within the U.S.A. Specific facts like when a crime against a client occurred, where it happened, and how they managed the incident are all vital. Even slight details of a case can make a significant impact on their applications for legal status. I also have learned that other facts like which country a client is from, and where or how they entered the U.S. greatly influence a person's ability to apply these statuses.

Thus far, my favorite part of working on the immigration team has been getting to meet and speak with such a variety of people. It is fascinating to not only hear about their journeys into the U.S. but also to empathize with the trials and hardships they have experienced. Being able to work one-on-one with individuals and families makes the work I am doing feel all the more impactful. If you support ODL's mission of making the law accessible to all and want to support other students like myself who work in the public interest sector you can see my fellowship link: <https://lnkd.in/g2Z7Ud5p>.

Thank you to Equal Justice America for supporting my summer experience at ODL.

Update 3:

This week I have been working on researching how ODL can begin assisting immigrant Unaccompanied Children as clients. The main discrepancy is that infants, or individuals under 18, cannot sign into legally binding contracts. I aimed to find out how [Open Door Legal](#) can take UAC as a client despite being a child. Because there is no clear rule or case to demonstrate how ODL should handle entering into bidding retainer agreements with UAC I researched both CA and Federal law regarding signing into contracts with incapacitated individuals. I learned about guardian ad litem. A guardian ad litem is someone who has the legal capacity to act on behalf of an incapacitated individual. The guardian ad litem does not act as a party in a case but rather completes procedural acts that the party cannot do for themselves. For example, they can sign retainer agreements, assist in filing complaints, and do several other things when the client does not understand the nature of the thing they are signing. Thus far, this seems to be the most promising solution as ODL would be able to have both the UAC client and an adult guardian sign to validate the retainer for the benefit of the UAC.

The second half of my research will consist of connecting with other organizations and asking how they tackle retainer agreements with UAC. I will also be drafting a reduced version of ODL's



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retainer agreement that will be used specifically for UAC. This retainer agreement will be shortened and catered to the needs of UAC.

The nexus between protecting children's autonomy while also preserving their ability to receive legal aid is fascinating. Particularly the topic of UAC is interesting because UACs are in the care of a court-appointed guardian. Sometimes the guardian is a family member or relative, and other times it is a government agency. UAC find themselves in a difficult and nuanced area of the law, where they are both not included or specifically barred from accessing because of their immigration status. I am so proud to be a part of a team that is focused on serving underserved communities like UAC and finding solutions to these kinds of issues. If you also value making the law accessible please consider supporting law students like me in continuing to work in the public sector by visiting my EJA fellowship link here: <https://lnkd.in/g2Z7Ud5p>.

Update 4:

This week at [Open Door Legal](#) has finalized clients' Special immigrant Juvenile application packets (SIJS). SIJS is a method of protection against an order of deportation. SIJS requires that a UAC must (1) be under 21 years of age, (2) unmarried, (3) dependent on a juvenile court, and (4) have it found by a court that it is not in their best interest to return to their country of origin and that reunification with one or both parents is unviable. The process of completing SIJS applications involved scanning and collecting required documents to compile an accurate application packet.

There was a lot of rereading, date checking, and verifying of names. It made me appreciate the need to be detail-oriented as well as patient. Even a small typo could completely change someone's chances for approval. Though daunting, it was also exciting to think that the work I was completing could help someone find a sense of security in the United States. I had to compile a total of four applications each with around 30 pages of information including cover letters, waivers, and required documents like birth certificates. Each packet had to have its documents in a specific order, as well as accompanying translations of documents that were originally in a different language.

I had the chance to utilize my Spanish-speaking skills to communicate with clients over the phone or in person when they came in to drop off needed forms. By far, this was my favorite part of my assignments as I was able to get to know each client and their family members. At times, it could be challenging hearing some of the stories clients would share with me, but with a trauma-informed method of listening, I was able to support them and myself appropriately. [Fabiano Valerio](#) has been an amazing mentor in both the technical aspect of filling out SIJS forms and the emotional process as well. He has given me advice on how to frame questions and answers to get the required information from a client without causing them harm. Learning how to hear a person's grievances and utilize my skills to advocate on their behalf has been an



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amazing experience. If you would like to contribute to my experience or other EJA fellows, please check out my EJA link here: <https://lnkd.in/g2Z7Ud5p>

Update 5:

As my fellowship at [Open Door Legal](#) came to an end, [Fabiano Valerio](#) focused my time on more challenging tasks. I finalized the four Special Immigrant Juvenile cases I was assigned and sat in on multiple intakes throughout the week. I also received feedback on my research memo and made revisions accordingly. Most of the edits I had to make were organizational and format-based. I found the research I did on UAC fascinating as it is a section of the law that is constantly changing and not often litigated. This meant I had to be creative and forward-thinking when researching potential problems ODL would face when taking on UACs as clients.

I also learned about the importance of a trauma-informed approach when speaking with clients. Not only is this method of listening and communicating important to prevent harm to the client but also to prevent harm to ourselves. I learned skills to compartmentalize the often heavy stories and devastating information I was receiving about clients. I learned how to sympathize with clients without taking on the emotional burden that came with their stories. An attentive and clear mind is necessary to assist others. I am especially grateful to have learned firsthand how to process these emotions and heavy loads as it will only become more relevant in my future career.

Finally, I learned about client management by sitting in on intakes. The intake would start simple. Though this part of the intake may seem trivial, it was a vital part of building trust and reassurance with the client. At the beginning of the intake, we also went over ODL policies of confidentiality so that the guest could feel comfortable telling us their stories. Efficiency was key to getting the most relevant information. However, this did not mean the intakes were rushed. In certain areas of questioning, where a guest had more information, we would spend more time in. Every time I assisted in an intake I learned something new about immigration law.

Immigration is a myriad of regulations and requirements that can be completely shifted by even a minor detail such as the birth year of a guest or their year of entry into the U.S.

As legislation only continues to ostracize immigrants and makes it more difficult for hardworking, honest people to receive documentation I am all the more grateful for my experience and the skills I learned at ODL. Not only am I proud to have contributed in some way to the amazing work ODL does for the immigrant community, but it has made me all the more excited for my future in the legal field. If you also value making the law accessible please consider supporting law students like me in continuing to work in the public sector by visiting my EJA fellowship link here: <https://lnkd.in/g2Z7Ud5p>.