



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

### EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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**Update 1:** I'm honored to join Equal Justice America's 2024 Fellowship cohort for my work with Inner City Law Center's Preventing and Ending Homelessness Project this summer. Inner City Law Center is the only legal service provider located in Los Angeles' Skid Row and exists to serve unhoused, indigent, and working-poor Angelenos who are struggling to obtain or maintain secure housing. The Preventing and Ending Homelessness Project takes a holistic approach to its legal advocacy, focusing on serving clients who have multiple, intersecting barriers to housing and economic security.

As part of my fellowship, I will be posting bi-weekly updates regarding the clients I meet and the projects I am assigned. I'm looking forward to the many advocates and clients that I will meet and work with this summer!

Already, I've jumped right into unlawful detainer (eviction) litigation, assisting on of our staff attorneys draft dispositive motions with the hopes of having our client's case dismissed before the "UD" trial date. UD litigation moves at a break-neck pace, so the timeline to draft, file, and serve dispositive motions is incredibly short. I've been down to the civil courthouse in DTLA multiple times and I'm very hopeful that our client will prevail.

I'm grateful for Equal Justice America's support this summer. The need for free or low-cost civil legal aid is dire: 80% of impoverished individuals lack access to critical services and less than 5% of tenants getting evicted across the US are represented by attorneys. If you're interested in furthering this important work, I encourage you to donate.

**Update 2:** As the summer has progressed, I've had the opportunity to join other legal interns in Los Angeles to tour the Stanley Mosk Civil Courthouse and sit in on a number of unlawful



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

detainer proceedings. These proceedings have been both fascinating and frustrating to watch. Given the complexity, speed, and high stakes of evictions, it has been discouraging to see how many unrepresented parties appear in court, particularly tenants. Some judges and commissioners have been patient with the pro se litigants, but their ethical duties proscribe the possibility of providing any meaningful assistance or guidance.

As Los Angeles considers a “Right to Counsel” in eviction proceedings, the need for more attorneys and legal advocates to take up this work is growing quickly. I was glad to meet so many law students and interns who are equally interested in advocating for the rights of tenants and working to ensure that fewer individuals are threatened with becoming unhoused.

Meanwhile, I anticipate continuing to work on the eviction cases assigned to my team at Inner City Law Center. As summary proceedings, these cases typically require motion and filings that are relatively shorter than other types of civil litigation, but they still move incredibly quickly. So, there has been plenty of research and drafting that I can do to help our team stay on track.

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**Update 3:** In addition to eviction defense, the Preventing and Ending Homelessness Project takes a holistic approach to helping our clients seek safe, long-term housing. This often includes assisting clients remove legal barriers to housing or economic security, such as a criminal conviction. Over the past two weeks I spent time researching the changes made by AB 731 to the rules governing criminal record expungements in California. Starting July 1, 2024, California greatly expanded the conditions for relief, presumably allowing even more individuals to have their records cleared. Having a criminal record continues to make it incredibly difficult for individuals to secure employment and quality housing.

As part of a petition for criminal record relief (an expungement), the individual seeking relief is encouraged to submit a declaration explaining how the “interests of justice” will be met if the relief is granted. This declaration provides an opportunity for the petitioner to tell their story, give context for their conviction, and explain how it continues to function as a barrier to their livelihood and success.

Sharing the story of one’s past criminal conviction can be incredibly painful, but it may also offer the opportunity to discuss an experience that is so often maligned and ignored in our society. Ultimately, it is not the role of the legal advocate to “decide” for the client what story to tell – though the advocate may be well suited to help guide the narrative, explain which facts might be more persuasive to a judge, and offer clarity in describing a deeply emotional, confusing, and traumatizing experience. This work has offered the renewed opportunity to reflect on the proper role of the legal advocate: to offer one’s tools, training, and expertise in service of the client’s actions and decisions to seek their own sense of relief, justice, and closure.



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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**Update 4:** In the past two weeks I have switched gears and begun working with Inner City Law Center’s Affirmative Litigation team, which takes a different tack to advocating for tenants and supporting stable housing in Los Angeles. Fighting against “slum housing” and landlords who fail to maintain suitable premises, the “AffLit” team initiates lawsuits on behalf of groups of tenants who wish to vindicate their rights to habitable housing and living situations free from harassment by their landlord.

Gathering facts from the plaintiffs in one particular case, I was immediately struck by the decision for tenants – neighbors – to stick together and support each other to advocate for their individual and collective right to safe and secure housing. Tenant unions, of which there are numerous in Los Angeles, promote a similar community-support approach. It is encouraging to see legal aid organizations like ICLC put their resources behind tenant activism. Additionally, whereas the eviction process can leave tenants feeling isolated from their neighbors and immediate community, the affirmative actions championed by ICLC encourages open communication and collaboration between neighbors. Furthermore, speaking with affected tenants reveals how stable housing underpins economic and emotional stability on both an individual level, and more broadly. That is, the looming threat of eviction and the emotional trauma that accompanies an unsafe or unstable housing situation often has cascading effects which often make working, eating, sleeping, and self-care incredibly hard. Individualized systems of support are critical, but without broader protections the harms caused by evictions and slum housing will continue to spread.

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**Update 5:** As an EJA Fellow and intern with Inner City Law Center, my summer experience provided an array of opportunities for me to witness the multiple angles that legal service providers take to reduce the occurrence of homelessness in Los Angeles. This included providing legal counsel for individuals facing eviction, representing tenants in affirmative litigation challenging uninhabitable units and retaliatory landlords, and supporting unhoused individuals who wished to surmount the many obstacles they face attempting to re-enter stable housing. While the goal of our advocacy was clear and consistent, there was no single, uniform approach, since each client had unique circumstances, needs, and desired outcomes.

Broadly, I learned more about how seriously complex it is to prevent or even slow the rise of homelessness in Los Angeles. And I came to better understand the significant resources that must be marshalled in attempting to make any positive changes. In just eviction defense alone, countless hours of an attorney’s time – researching, writing, filing, and appearing in court – are required to protect a tenant’s ability to stay in their home. And that doesn’t include the significant resources that the Courts must expend to process all the eviction cases. All this effort to prevent an outcome (eviction and the likelihood of homelessness that might follow) which



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

might be more efficiently prevented through better social policies, like subsidizing the cost of rent for tenants at risk of losing their housing. While individualized systems of support are critical, unless we seek broader protections, the harm caused by evictions and deplorable housing conditions will continue to increase.

My experience as an EJA fellow this summer has shaped my future as a legal advocate by helping me better understand that balance that I wish to bring between client-centered work and developing positive social policy. I remain steadfast in my desire to pursue work that centers on the experiences and needs of indigent people and marginalized communities. Eviction defense in particular is a deeply human practice, demanding empathy, patience, and emotional intelligence. Remaining committed to the client's needs and desires is paramount. Attempting to shape individual experiences into policy that might positively benefit the lives of many requires the same attention and care. The EJA fellowship has helped solidify my determination to ground all my future advocacy work in the live experience and struggle of the people – clients, communities, partners – with whom I work.