



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024 EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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<b>ORGANIZATION</b>	Kids in Need of Defense

**Update 1:** As part of my law school experience, this summer I am working at Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), an organization that provides free legal services to unaccompanied migrant children once they are in the United States. Due to the complex nature of the issue and the deep trauma these children experience, KIND provides a multi-faceted approach through legal protection, policy advocacy, social services, and additional programming around the world. Most of these children are fleeing pervasive narco-trafficking, human trafficking, and gang violence from which their governments cannot or will not protect them. Others are fleeing severe abuse including sexual and gender-based violence. In the United States, immigration judges are 100 times more likely to grant legal relief to unaccompanied children with counsel than those without.

My work this summer would not be possible without the support of Equal Justice America, a fellowship program that funds law schools pursuing internships at civil legal aid organizations. Today, 80% of the civil legal needs for those living in poverty are going unmet. EJA allows students like me to pursue work for which they are truly passionate and help bridge the legal gap.

**Update 2:** It has been an amazing experience working with unaccompanied migrant children at Kids in Need of Defense (KIND).

Headlines on immigration are devoid of migrants' lived experiences, and too often the only people advocating on their behalf are attorneys. As of 2023, only 53% of unaccompanied minors were represented by counsel. The reality of our current immigration system is that young children, the majority of whom face a violent reality in their home country, are representing themselves in court.

This summer I have been compiling research for a complex asylum case and interviewing



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applicants for KIND services. It has been an honor to hear these children's stories and to be able to help bridge the immense gap in legal services.

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**Update 3:** This month at Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) has been a whirlwind of court observations, client interviews, and legal research for asylum cases.

This work is an interesting fusion of immigration and family law as many clients apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. It's been an amazing opportunity to learn about this intersection in the law, and I'm grateful for Equal Justice America's support!

If you want to help support the next generation of public interest attorneys through summer stipends and post-graduate fellowships, please consider donating to EJA!

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**Update 4:** My summer internship with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) is quickly coming to a close. For this update, I'd like to highlight the current realities of the U.S. asylum process.

When an individual enters the United States, they may be placed in Expedited Removal, which authorizes DHS to issue rapid removal orders to certain individuals who have recently entered. To avoid violating international law, CBP gives individuals a "fear interview" to determine whether the person can demonstrate a "significant possibility" they would be able to qualify for asylum. If so, the individual must submit their application for asylum within 1 year of entering. Unaccompanied minors are not subject to expedited removal or the 1-year filing deadline.

There are currently over 2 million asylum claims pending in the United States (about 1 million in immigration courts and the other half pending in USCIS). This means that, on average, asylum seekers wait about 4 years for an immigration court decision and over 6 years for a USCIS decision.

The result is uncertainty for both child and adult asylum seekers. KIND works tirelessly to support children in their asylum cases, but the process is grueling for everyone involved. Asylum remains one of the main legal avenues for immigrants seeking status, which, in combination with COVID and extended asylum office closures, has given us the current situation.

Like many of my peers, I am able to pursue my goal of improving the current system because of Equal Justice America.

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**Update 5:** Last week I completed my summer internship with Kids in Need of Defense. KIND staff and their pro bono partners at law firms, corporations, and law schools nationwide represent unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children in their immigration proceedings. KIND's mission is to ensure that no child is left to navigate the complex immigration system, or appear in court, alone.

I have worked on a complex asylum case, SIJS applications, and employment authorization applications. I've completed forms, compiled country conditions, and researched Fourth Circuit and BIA case law. I was also grateful to work in Spanish daily when speaking with clients and



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applicants and as an interpreter during mock proceedings. I was able to observe several juvenile court proceedings as well as immigration court hearings. Now, at the end of my internship, I reflect on a well-rounded experience that has affirmed what I want to pursue after graduation.

I want to thank all the attorneys, paralegals, and social service coordinators who took the time to teach and mentor our intern team. Ten weeks is a short amount of time to bring law students up to speed on the workings of a fast-paced office, but everyone was incredibly welcoming and supportive. We learned so much from our coffee chats and lunch with different staff members and their road to KIND. A highlight was our office pizza lunch to celebrate the end of the summer.

Immigration law is hard and unrelenting, but I am inspired to know that there are so many hardworking and brilliant attorneys working to fight for immigrant rights. As one wise staff member said, when the work gets hard, that's when you know you have to stay and fight. I know that my experience this summer will power me through the next year of law school and beyond.

A final thanks to Equal Justice America for helping fund my summer.