



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## SUMMER 2024

### EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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**Update 1:** This summer I am interning with the Criminal Legal Systems Reform group at the Southern Poverty Law Center. I'm 2 weeks in and I've already learned so much about how to investigate claims of systemic and flagrant violations of the constitutional rights of incarcerated people. Just because you are serving time does not mean that you lose your right to life, liberty, and dignity - in fact, it becomes the government's burden to ensure those rights are protected. When patterns and practices across state or federal institutions compromise that dignity, groups like SPLC step up to intervene.

I'm also working remotely from St. Louis, and SPLC's attorneys are spread around the country. This location flexibility is becoming more common in legal nonprofits, which allows attorneys to expand the scope of their representation. Remote work means we can collaborate with experts in different areas of law, contact more potential class members, and get more people involved in public interest law - regardless of our home base. Whether you're practicing at a firm in New York, D.C., or Los Angeles, or you're located in a rural area, it has never been easier to support life-altering civil rights work.

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**Update 2:** Three big takeaways so far.

First, shifting focus to state-based litigation is a national trend to combat a SCOTUS hostile to civil rights. But that doesn't mean that it is any easier in the southern states where SPLC works. The bar to achieve essential measures of justice - e.g. constitutional conditions of confinement and postconviction relief - is still so high, it's almost impossible to meet.

Second, it is really hard to investigate and find a plaintiff for impact-style cases. Impact-focused organizations should invest in on-the-ground relationships (whether by hiring organizers and community advocates, or something else).



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Third, working for an organization founded on combatting hate and extremism during this election cycle is deeply moving. But also, even though SPLC has a storied reputation and some endowment funds to boot, we're at the whims of political missions. The problem is that litigation is much slower than the changing winds of politics and public policy focus, so we're still working on important issues that left the social discourse years ago.

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**Update 3:** I'm sure it won't come as a shock to my network, but public interest attorneys are paid significantly less compared to their counterparts in the corporate sector. According to the National Association of Law Placement, the median starting salary for a public interest attorney is around \$50,000. In contrast, starting salaries for corporate lawyers at large firms can exceed \$190,000. And mid-size firms (many of whom operate a plaintiff-side practice) are being driven out of business because they are unable to compete financially. Mid-size firms are either merging with larger firms or shutting down, leading to a concentration of legal power and diminished client options. This stark disparity illustrates a troubling trend that threatens the sustainability and effectiveness of the public interest legal sector.

The wide salary gap has far-reaching implications. For one, it discourages law graduates burdened with substantial student loan debt from pursuing careers in public interest law (tuition went up again this year; a seasoned attorney recently suggested schools should set tuition amount for students upon their acceptance – they can raise the amount for each new class, but once you've paid your first semester, you're locked into that amount for the rest of your degree. A tiny change in the inflated price of tuition, but still a simple policy to implement). When public interest orgs can't compete and few avenues exist for students to pay off inflated tuition debt, the number of talented attorneys available to represent vulnerable populations reduces and corporate interests are prioritized over civil liberties. The legal system wasn't designed to only work for people who can pay for it.

In the long run, the underpayment of public interest attorneys could lead to a justice system skewed in favor of those who can afford high-priced services. Addressing this pay gap is essential to ensuring a balanced and fair legal system that serves all segments of society, not just the wealthy.

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**Update 4:** Recognizing fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is crucial for ensuring fairness in the legal process. FASD results from prenatal alcohol exposure. Although it is understudied, it is still linked to a range of physical, behavioral, and cognitive impairments that significantly influence an individual's behavior and decision-making abilities. But because it is rarely recognized and manifests differently, necessary help is often unavailable. Importantly, FASD is a mitigating factor in criminal prosecutions. But, when defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges don't know how to identify it, people with FASD may be sentenced due to a presumed culpability that the defendant doesn't actually have.

Recognizing FASD can not only ensure fair sentencing but also can aid in the development of appropriate interventions and support, reducing the likelihood of recidivism. This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to justice that considers underlying health issues and advocates for tailored legal responses.



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**Update 5:** This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to intern at the Southern Poverty Law Center as an Equal Justice America fellow. My experience was both challenging and deeply rewarding, offering me a firsthand look into the complexities of civil rights law and the critical work being done to advance justice in the South.

Throughout my internship, I had the privilege of working on a variety of projects that expanded my understanding of the legal system. I delved into state-based post-conviction review, a process that allows individuals who have been wrongfully convicted or unfairly sentenced to seek relief. This work underscored the importance of diligent legal representation and the often-overlooked avenues for justice that exist at the state level.

In addition, I explored state-based parole administration, gaining insight into how parole decisions are made and the significant impact these decisions have on individuals' lives. My research in this area highlighted the disparities in parole outcomes and the need for reform to ensure that the process is fair and equitable for all.

One of the most fascinating aspects of my internship was investigating police searches involving canines. I examined the legal standards governing these searches and their implications for civil liberties. This work was particularly eye-opening, as it revealed the nuanced legal arguments surrounding search and seizure rights and the potential for abuse in law enforcement practices. I was fortunate to conclude my internship by meeting my colleagues in person in Montgomery, Alabama. Surrounded by the heart of the civil rights movement, we discussed the ongoing battles for justice and equality in America. Our conversations were enriched by the proximity to some of the most significant civil rights monuments in the country, serving as a poignant reminder of the historical context in which our work is situated.