



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Anne McDonough
LAW SCHOOL	Yale Law School
ORGANIZATION	Legal Aid Chicago

Update 1: This summer, I'm excited to have the opportunity to intern in the Housing Practice Group at Legal Aid Chicago. The need for civil legal aid is staggering. Low-income Americans do not receive any or enough legal help for more than 90% of the civil legal problems they face, and the consequences of that are often devastating. Legal Aid Chicago fills this void, providing assistance to approximately 24,000 people living in poverty in the Chicago area each year. In the first few weeks of my internship in the housing practice, I have learned a lot through observing client intakes, client calls, and eviction court. I have also seen first-hand the importance of Legal Aid Chicago's interdisciplinary model of client support. Under this model, attorneys and social workers work together to resolve clients' legal problems and to help address other challenges that contribute to, or result from, legal issues. In my first assignment, for example, the client was facing eviction after recently suffering several severe incidents of domestic violence, among other challenges. Legal Aid Chicago secured a dismissal of the eviction by negotiating a move-out agreement with the landlord under the protections of the Safe Homes Act and provided resources and referrals for supportive services. I look forward to sharing more about my internship and Legal Aid Chicago's work in the weeks to come. Many thanks to Equal Justice America for supporting this work!

Update 2: Yesterday, in the fifth week of my internship at Legal Aid Chicago, the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*, rejecting a constitutional challenge to laws criminalizing homelessness. The majority decided that people with nowhere else to go, in places that lack enough shelter space much less affordable housing, can be arrested, jailed, and criminally prosecuted for sheltering outside. The decision is a sobering reminder of one of the many ways in which the work that the Housing Practice Group at Legal Aid Chicago does is so important. Legal Aid Chicago helps clients avoid homelessness and all the precarious consequences that can accompany it. Most of Legal Aid Chicago's clients facing eviction have a very low income and receive a housing subsidy, which means that a public program pays some portion (or all) of their monthly rent. If they do not avoid an eviction order in their case, they would lose not only their current housing, but also their subsidy going forward. Without the



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subsidy, these clients would simply have no ability to rent on the private market. The stakes of this work could not be higher—particularly after yesterday’s decision. Eviction defense is homelessness prevention. I am grateful to be learning about this work this summer. I thank Equal Justice America for supporting it.

Update 3: Legal Aid Chicago is one of a handful of organizations in Illinois that receives funding from HUD to enforce fair housing laws at the federal, state, and local level. This summer, one area that I have been learning more about within the fair housing space is source of income (SOI) discrimination, which is a pervasive problem in the private rental market. Landlords will refuse to rent to people who pay rent with the help of public subsidies like housing vouchers. This form of discrimination directly undermines the very public programs designed to help address the affordable housing crisis. It limits a voucher holder’s ability to move to areas closer to work or school, or their ability leave housing conditions that have become unhealthy, unsafe, or abusive. Recently, Illinois extended fair housing protections to combat this problem, but that is just the beginning. As I’ve learned these past few weeks, SOI discrimination can be difficult to prove, and housing providers exploit loopholes to skirt SOI protections. The challenges are steep, but Legal Aid Chicago is leading the way. Guided by clients’ experiences, attorneys here are developing novel, creative legal arguments to help low-income people across the city secure healthy, safe places to live. I am grateful for the chance to work on developing these cases this summer and for EJA’s support.

Update 4: Though I have been focused primarily on housing this summer, I also have had the chance to learn about other vital legal aid practice areas. Legal Aid Chicago has six practice groups in addition to housing: Children & Families, Immigrants & Workers Rights, Long-Term Care, Consumer, Public Benefits, and Pro Bono & Community Partnerships. Almost every week, Legal Aid Chicago has hosted “snacks with staff” events for interns, where staff attorneys and other members of a particular practice group talk about their work, their path into legal aid, and their advice for law students seeking to pursue a public interest career. The discussions were very inspiring and illuminating. They provided valuable insights into how legal work varies across and within practice groups. The Children & Families practice (CFPG), for example, provides an array of assistance, from custody, divorce, and protection orders, to advocating for students’ rights under Title IX. Earlier this month, the impact of Legal Aid Chicago’s CFPG was highlighted on the national stage when a former client and current board member testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee about the importance of funding civil legal aid. CFPG helped Ms. Gonzalez, a survivor of domestic violence, find safety and keep custody of her children in a complex, multi-state dispute. Because clients often have multiple (at times overlapping) legal issues at once, having seven practice groups under one roof allows Legal Aid Chicago to provide comprehensive legal support. EJA’s support for civil legal aid helps make this work possible.

Update 5: My internship in the Housing Practice Group at Legal Aid Chicago this summer has now come to an end. I learned a tremendous amount about the challenges that low-income people face in securing and maintaining safe, decent, affordable housing. I also had the chance to be involved in legal work at different stages of a case, from client intakes, complaint drafting, and research for a motion, to discovery and settlement.



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Another highlight for me was attending the full practice group meetings each week. In these meetings, staff discuss new cases, spot legal issues, and identify potential defenses. Since the need for housing legal aid far exceeds the practice group's capacity, staff ultimately make difficult decisions about which cases to take on during these meetings. They analyze the strength of legal defenses and sketch out strategies for how they can best help clients. The discussions underscored how fruitful collaborative lawyering can be. The meetings also yielded illuminating, albeit sobering, lessons on the possibilities of legal aid (and the need for policy reforms).

Looking back over the summer, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from the zealous, creative advocates in the Housing Practice Group. I have been inspired by how they deftly help clients resolve individual housing cases and work on longer-term initiatives to change the systemic problems their clients face.

My internship this summer has deepened my interest in housing justice and intersecting areas of discrimination and consumer protection law. As I move forward in my legal career, I want to continue to learn about these important areas. Again, I want to express my many thanks to Equal Justice America for supporting my internship and the work of Legal Aid Chicago this summer. By funding law students and recent graduates working in civil legal aid, EJA helps organizations provide vital legal services to low-income people across the country.