



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2025

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	John Smolak
LAW SCHOOL	Boston College
ORGANIZATION	Greater Boston Legal Services

Final Reflection:

My summer with Greater Boston Legal Services' Consumer Rights Unit was enlightening, invigorating, and has instilled a continuing desire to advance the public interest and expand access to legal counsel for all. Concurrently, I gained skills in research, drafting, oral argument, and more.

Over the course of 12 weeks, I learned to litigate, advocate, and counsel. Our work focused primarily on helping indigent clients avoid crushing debt burdens. The largest chunk of my work this summer was working to advance two pieces of legislation, aimed at preventing indebted drivers from losing their licenses and thus their ability to work; and at helping domestic abuse survivors shift debt liability for debts accrued under their name by their abuser. To make this happen, I dove deep into state regulations, checking to ensure that provisions worked as intended, and worked closely with impacted individuals to get their story across to the legislators who would be considering the bills. This work culminated in a pair of legislative committee hearings in July, where both bills were recommended for advancement.

I also went to court twice a week to litigate cases under the supervision of GBLS' attorneys. Why do this? Every day, a court can hear dozens of debt collections cases. Many defendants don't show up, because they're either unaware of how court works or they don't receive proper notice, and the court issues default judgements against them. Those that do show up generally do not know their rights or what the debt collection company must prove. Frequently, the cases against these individuals are deeply flawed, with gaping holes in the evidence. That's where GBLS comes in. We went to court, reviewed the docket with the client, and defended them at their hearing, all in the same day. In many cases, we achieved a positive outcome, whether that be a reduction



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

in damages or an outright dismissal. Over the course of a single year, defending these cases keeps \$1,000,000 in the pockets of indigent clients.

The clients we work with are indigent as a rule, and the amounts we save them represent months of salary that they cannot afford to lose. The work that the CRU does allows families to break the cycle of debt. This in turn allows those families to start the multi-generational process of building financial stability.

The passion, intelligence, and drive of the attorneys I worked with this summer has deeply impacted me. I am now working to help GBLS find ways to expand its small claims debt defense clinic. We are preparing to teach law students how to defend against consumer debt cases in small claims court, so that we can increase GBLS' capacity and expand this clinic to more courts. I'm deeply thankful to GBLS for bringing me on, and to Equal Justice America for making it possible for me to take this opportunity this summer.