



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2025

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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| NAME | Daniella Lopez |
| LAW SCHOOL | Fordham University School of Law |
| ORGANIZATION | New York Legal Assistance Group |

Final Reflection:

My fellowship experience has been incredibly rewarding. EJA first supported me during my senior year of college, and this summer, before my final year of law school, I had the privilege of being sponsored again. I spent the summer with the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) in the Special Litigation Unit, where I worked on class action and impact litigation. I learned so much about the different stages of class action work and had the chance to get hands-on experience with high-profile cases that addressed deep, systemic issues.

Two cases that stood out to me were *Engesser et al. v. McDonald* and *Dylan Lopez Contreras v. Leonard Oddo*. *Engesser* hit close to home. In that case, NYLAG and Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler LLP represented six individuals and two independent living centers who were challenging the New York State Department of Health's transition to a single fiscal intermediary, Public Partnerships LLC. This change threatened the Consumer-Directed Personal Assistance Program (CDPAP), which so many older New Yorkers and people with disabilities depend on. My grandmother is a CDPAP consumer and my mom is her personal assistant, so I knew firsthand what was at stake. It felt meaningful to bring that perspective to the team. My role included speaking with consumers and personal assistants whose lives were being disrupted and helping elevate their cases to the Department of Health when paychecks or benefits were being withheld.

The second case, *Dylan Lopez Contreras v. Leonard Oddo*, was just as impactful in a different way. Dylan, a Bronx high school student, was detained by ICE after an immigration court appearance, even though he had legally entered the country under a Biden-era program. His case was dismissed in error, which set off a chain of events that led to his detention and near



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deportation. NYLAG successfully petitioned to have his case reinstated, but what struck me most was how easily due process can be undermined when enforcement is unchecked. Working on this case deepened my commitment to defending immigrant rights and gave me a clearer sense of how to push back against practices that strip away dignity and fairness.

Beyond the individual cases, what stood out to me about NYLAG was the client-centered and collaborative way the units worked together. Attorneys and advocates shared expertise so clients facing complex challenges could get holistic support. Seeing that in action showed me how powerful teamwork can be when serving communities that are too often overlooked.

None of this would have been possible without the support of the EJA Fellowship. At a time when public interest work is often attacked and undermined, the fellowship allowed me to feel empowered and secure in my commitment to this path. As a first-generation student from a financially disadvantaged background, having that stability in pursuing public interest law has been invaluable. I am deeply grateful to EJA for making this possible through its support, and I will continue to speak highly of the fellowship and encourage both my peers and future students to apply!