



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2025

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Tessa Fries
LAW SCHOOL	University of Virginia
ORGANIZATION	New York Legal Assistance Group

Final Reflection:

This summer, I had the privilege of serving as an Equal Justice America fellow with the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) in their Special Education Unit. In this role, I worked alongside dedicated attorneys who represent families navigating one of the most complex—and consequential—areas of education law: securing the services and supports that students with disabilities are legally entitled to under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Over the course of the summer, I helped draft several due process complaints on behalf of students who had been denied appropriate educational services for years. In each case, the student’s needs were evident—whether they required specialized instruction, therapeutic services, or a smaller, more supportive school environment. Yet too often, the school system had failed to respond. Through legal advocacy, families were given a stronger voice and a pathway toward ensuring their children’s rights were recognized.

One of the most meaningful moments for me was visiting a New York City public school for the first time. It was also my first time back in a classroom since leaving my role as a special education administrator in Philadelphia. Before law school, my work with students was hands-on: I was in classrooms, collaborating with teachers, and engaging directly with families. This summer, my work was different. Much of my time was spent drafting complaints, reviewing IEPs, and preparing legal documents—tasks that felt more removed from students’ day-to-day lives. Adjusting to this shift challenged me at first, but it also deepened my appreciation for how legal advocacy underpins what happens in schools and protects the rights of students and families. The challenges were real: the special education process is dense, slow-moving, and often adversarial, requiring families to persistently advocate—sometimes for years—just to access



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

basic services. But I also witnessed how effective legal support can empower families and influence meaningful outcomes.

This fellowship gave me a hands-on perspective on how law can support educational equity and reinforced the importance of advocacy at both the systemic and individual levels. I am deeply grateful to Equal Justice America for making this experience possible, and to NYLAG for showing me what thorough, client-centered advocacy looks like in practice.