EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2025

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

NAME	Trenaj Mongo
LAW SCHOOL	Yale Law School
ORGANIZATION	Southern Center for Human Rights

Final Reflection:

My name is Trenaj Mongo, and I am a 3L at Yale Law School. This summer, I interned with the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR). SCHR primarily works with those impacted by capital punishment and a lot of the organization's attention centers on post-conviction work. Over the course of the summer, I worked with the investigations team, collecting and digesting court; analyzed court transcripts and audio tapes for Batson claims; conducted intake calls with those seeking justice for themselves and/or family members; undertook research focused on Sixth Amendment issues for our clients; and, finally, was afforded the opportunity to represent an incarcerated individual for their parole hearing in front of the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles. Prior to my summer with SCHR, I was blessed to have taken a capital punishment course taught by none other than the founder of the Southern Center for Human Rights, Professor Steve Bright and his course truly opened my eyes to the horrors of capital punishment and the immensely disproportionate effects it has on Black, brown, intellectually disabled, and other marginalized communities. However, seeing that impact firsthand, with real clients and real stories, further motivates me to join the fight to end capital punishment and see a world free from mass incarceration.

My experience representing my client in his parole hearing was particularly rewarding. In mid-June, I took on my client's case: I was to represent an individual serving a life sentence, whose parole hearing was scheduled to go before the board in late July. From June through the end of July, I met with my client in prison multiple times, interviewed correctional officers, family members, and friends, as well as contacted various reentry programs to draft an advocacy packet for my client to present to the board. After submitting my client's packet, I turned my attention to preparing my argument before the board—as well as preparing his family for their remarks. On the evening before my client's hearing, I traveled to Montgomery, AL and the next

morning, I, along with ten of my client's family members—including his mother, brothers, wife, and young child—arrived at the parole building. In my two minutes before the board, I outlined my client's stellar institutional record, his robust family and community support, as well as his detailed reentry plan. In the face of the starkest of odds, I am fortunate to report that my client was granted parole and has received another opportunity to be with his family and make a positive impact in his community.

It is still difficult to put into words how impactful this experience was for me. At every step of the way—from meeting with my client for the first time as a "mere" law student, to the hours-long calls with my client's family members, helping them draft their letters of support, to the moment I was before the Board, tasked with summarizing my client's entire story in just 120 seconds—everything felt daunting. However, through every juncture of self-doubt, I reminded myself of my why and what I told everyone during my law school application process: that if I can change one person's life trajectory and help them avoid the criminal justice system, that would be helping a village, and I would have validated all the work I put in to get my J.D. While I am no longer representing my client, I have plans to stay in my client's life and hope to greet him with his family when he is released. I am extremely grateful to SCHR and Equal Justice America for supporting me along this journey and equipping me with skills to advocate for those impacted by the complexities of our criminal justice system.