



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: My first two and a half weeks as a Summer Law Clerk at Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) have been interesting, challenging, and meaningful -- exactly what I was looking for when I was looking for a 1L summer job. As a member of the Restoring Communities (or ReCo) working group, I have been exposed to the world of post-conviction relief, including and especially record expungement under various California statutes. Clients come to us seeking help in filing a petition for expungement for reasons related to the collateral consequences of a criminal record, such as difficulty finding housing or employment and obtaining professional licensures. Often, clients are trying to put a challenging past behind them, and their conviction history is one of the only remaining impediments to a stable future. I have been working on processing client intakes, as there is a high demand for expungement services and resultant backlog, supporting attorneys at community clinics, and drafting declarations: personal statements that tell a client's story and put their conviction history in narrative context. This past week, I helped to interview a woman who overcame heartbreaking sexual abuse and addiction to carve a new path for herself, earning her master's degree in social work. She is seeking expungement in order to pursue her LCSW licensure. I'm looking forward to working on her case and others in the coming weeks!

Update 2: As I approach the midway point of my time at LAFLA, I'm struck by how quickly everything is moving, and I'm already feeling like there will be unfinished business by the time it's over. I've continued to work on expungements with clients -- I finished the declaration for the client I referenced in my last update, who is seeking her LCSW licensure, and am almost ready to file her petition with the court -- but am also branching out, particularly in the housing space. I spent much of the last week doing research on federal and state disability law in order to draft a reply brief for a piece of affirmative litigation we're undertaking (rare for the Restoring Communities team) on behalf of a disabled client whose housing benefits were wrongfully



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terminated. Relatedly, I'm working with a co-clerk on research generally around the termination of Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) related to criminal activity, an area in which housing authorities have a lot of discretion that is often used to the detriment of justice-impacted individuals. Although our work is re-entry specific, it is by nature holistic – in addition to helping a woman with a motion to reduce a felony on her record to a misdemeanor, I'm helping her send a demand letter to her landlord and file a reasonable accommodation claim. Finally, I attended a clinic at a LGBTQ+ center last week and helped file a petition to get a transgender woman's name and gender identifier changed on her legal documents, which was so powerful and exciting. By the time of my next update, I hope to have made some more filings with the court!

Update 3: The last few weeks, I really feel like I've hit my stride at LAFLA! The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher termination research has really taken off, in particular. My co-clerk Alyssa and I have been interviewing members of LAFLA's own housing group to get their perspective on how the housing authority uses criminal activity as a basis for termination of assistance, and we've discovered that they're often using a triad of termination reasons: criminal activity, failure to report absence from the unit due to arrest, and fraud (due to failure to report). Therefore, three separate termination reasons can arise out of the same arrest event, and there's no indication that mitigating circumstances (even those mandated by law, such as a disability or domestic violence context) are taken into account. We're working on some educational materials to present to the local housing authority to educate them on their legal responsibilities and general rehabilitation information, as well as drafting a set of public records requests to better understand the housing authority's internal policies and procedures. The project will culminate with testimony at a public hearing at the end of the month, where we'll present excerpts of our research to the housing authority's board. The research has been paralleled and given meaningful context by a case we're working on with a client who was wrongfully terminated from her housing assistance. Looking forward to wrapping up these next couple weeks!

Update 4: Today, I began my second to last week at LAFLA! I'm definitely feeling like there are more things on my plate than I can reasonably finish in the next 9 days, so I'm making a short list of deliverables and things to pass on to the other team members who'll pick up the work once I leave. I'm struck by how legal aid is really a collaborative project – there's no pride of ownership or resentment for having to help someone else out. Our clients are the team's clients, and the work is treated accordingly. Interesting work continues to come in the door: today, I drafted a motion for reconsideration for a client whose expungement petitions were denied after a judge (inaccurately) deemed him ineligible. I'm learning what tone to strike when asking the court to reconsider its decisions, and how to articulate a legal standard and its application in a way that advocates for the client while also educating on the law. My co-clerk Alyssa and I also finished our final draft of a section of an advocacy letter to the local housing authority that'll go out later this week. We've been scouring their policies, interviewing stakeholders and advocates about their



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experiences, and formulating recommendations so that the housing authority's policies incorporate the realities of criminal justice system impact and reflect the discretion afforded to them by federal regulations (e.g. considering individual circumstances rather than automatically terminating voucher holders upon an arrest). It's been an illuminating and meaningful project. By the time of my next update, I'll be done at LAFLA and will have some final reflections to share!

Final Reflection: I am so grateful to have had the summer that I did at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), supported by the fellowship I received from EJA. It marked my first experience with legal aid services, which I had long admired but didn't know if or how it would factor into my career trajectory. I now feel confident that any job I take out of law school will need to have a direct services component, and may very well be a legal aid position. I was reminded that working with clients is my passion and also reflects my strongest skills. I received positive feedback from clients about my working style and personal demeanor that I'll carry with me for a long time. At LAFLA, the relational element of our work was emphasized almost as much as the legal substance, and I appreciated the way LAFLA made space for us to spend time listening to clients, affirming their experiences, and making sure our work was responsive to their needs. This is truly only possible in an environment where you aren't billing the client for every 6 minutes of time you spend with them, and it's how I want to show up as an attorney.

The legal substance, however, certainly wasn't lacking. I learned so much about the landscape of post-conviction relief in California, and became confident advising clients about their options for expungement, record sealing, and offense reduction. I was able to compile petitions for filing for multiple clients, and took the helm on certain cases such that I was the primary advocate and point of contact for clients. Furthermore, I also learned that legal aid attorneys can't afford to be single-issue specialists. Clients seeking legal aid services often have overlapping and concurrent issues they need addressed, and advocates need to be prepared to receive this, providing direction while understanding their own capacity and limitations. Spending time at walk-in clinics observing my supervisor, I was struck by how she knew enough about family law, property law, criminal law, AND post-conviction options to respond to whatever clients walked in the door with and send them on their way with referrals and a plan.

The research project that I worked on with my co-clerk was also one of the highlights of the summer and helped me understand how policy work and community advocacy can dovetail with direct services. Our work on a brief for a client suing the local housing authority over a "criminal activity"-related termination of her assistance led to research into the housing authority's policies regarding criminal activity and the many ways that they are out of touch with realities of the criminal legal system. We wrote a policy recommendation letter to the housing authority, drafted CPRA requests, and gave testimony at the housing authority's public comment hearing. The way the policy work was informed and deepened by the client work taught me that



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I want to pursue positions that allow for client-specific and community advocacy, because they stem from the same root causes.

I'm grateful for all of the incredible guidance and mentorship that I received from my colleagues at LAFLA and the support I felt from EJA throughout the entirety of the summer. Legal aid forever!



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