



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Abigail Hartzel
LAW SCHOOL	Boston University School of Law
ORGANIZATION	De Novo Center for Justice and Healing

Update 1: This summer, I am honored to be a Legal Intern the Housing Unit at De Novo Center for Justice & Healing. I am grateful to have received funding from the American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness and Poverty, Boston University School of Law Public Service Summer Funding, and Equal Justice America. The financial support from these institutions allow me and other public interest law students like me to do meaningful and greatly necessary work during our summers.

As I begin my fourth week with De Novo, it is remarkable that such little time has passed. De Novo is the type of organization I have always wanted to work out; they recognize the interdisciplinary nature of legal issues and seek to provide long-lasting support through providing both free legal services and low-cost counseling to those who qualify. I am grateful to learn from and work with attorneys, counselors, and administrative staff who are welcoming, approachable, and very talented in their roles. The interdisciplinary model unique to De Novo is evident in how the attorneys approach their work, both with their clients and in their collaboration with each other.

I have shadowed housing attorneys during client meetings and assist tenants through the Lawyer for a Day program. My mentors model how to negotiate in pressured, stressful environments while always centering and prioritizing client autonomy and decision-making. They gracefully exhibit how both collaboration and independence are important skills for a legal aid attorney to hone.

I am particularly appreciative of the independence that De Novo affords its legal interns; thus far, I have led multiple client interviews and taken point writing answers and discovery requests for two clients. In doing so, I have greatly expanded and deepened my knowledge of housing



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

law, eviction defenses, and the steps to summary process eviction. I am currently working on a long-term project to create a resource guide for pro bono attorneys and student attorneys to empower them to help tenants through Lawyer for a Day and other programs. As housing costs rise, housing availability remains stagnant, and legal aid is continuously strapped for resources, encouraging and enabling pro bono eviction defense is especially important.

I would be remiss to not mention how grateful I am to my mentor Naomi Mann and her Boston University School of Law Access to Justice Clinic for preparing me so well for this experience. I would not be able to jump in so quickly if it was not for all of her guidance and support through two eviction defense cases this past spring semester.

Update 2: In the past few weeks, I've taken on my first client as lead and worked with various community partner organizations that do vital work in the housing stability and sustainability space. Learning how to work as a team with community partners and social workers is key part of becoming an effective legal aid attorney. For this reason, I am thankful that De Novo puts on interdisciplinary trainings for its interns so that we have a better understanding of how the counseling team and different legal units operate.

I am grateful to be able to work in housing justice and eviction defense, where upwards of 96% of tenants lack representation (as compared to 10% of unrepresented landlords).

Update 3: Highlights from the last two weeks include:

- * Draft a motion in an emergency case advocating that the cancellation fee resulting from a stay of levy of execution not be imposed on the tenant.
- * Write an answer and discovery requests for a client and center client empowerment and knowledge throughout the process.
- * Write research memos related to the interactions between housing law, immigration law, and bankruptcy.
- * Attend interdisciplinary case rounds where attorneys and clinical social workers collaborate and share knowledge and advice to improve each other's role as counselors and advocates.

Update 4:

As I've reflected on my last two weeks at De Novo Center for Justice and Healing, I keep coming back to how important the community partners that we work with are.

Working in civil legal aid is a constant reminder that the law is just one tool, and of course a very important one, but one that can only go so far without collaboration with the resources. Community partners that prioritize housing stability and provide financial and administrative support to our neighbors in housing crisis are absolutely key to keeping people housed,



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

especially once cases have entered the courtroom. Just in the last week alone, in both the Lawyer for the Day and full representation settings, I have worked with three different community organizations that have provided vital emergency financial support to keep tenants and their families housed. Being a legal advocate also means being advocate generally to stakeholders beyond opposing counsel and a judge. That out-of-the-courtroom advocacy can be what triggers legal defenses and make a settlement agreement work.

I am grateful that my time at De Novo has taught me so much about the law, but also the lawyering skills that make a lawyer a truly great advocate.

Final Reflection: My summer internship at De Novo Center for Justice and Healing has come to a close. I feel very lucky to have spent my summer contributing to meaningful legal work at an organization that strives to center its clients through interdisciplinary service.

Practicing in civil legal aid involves learning how to best represents and advocate for clients within the system as it stands, and learning all the ways that our current legal system fails, and, too often, is designed to fail, our clients. As I learned how to best represent and advocate for my clients, I had the privilege of shadowing different attorneys with different styles, which showed me that versatility and identifying when to use different tactics is a key part of great lawyering. I navigated difficult negotiations with opposing counsel while uplifting the humanity of my clients. I was proud to provide advice and limited assistance representation to tenants on-the-spot at Lawyer for the Day, which often involved identifying procedural errors that create significant consequences in a case, but are very difficult to identify without knowing what to look for. As someone who deeply values educating and empowering clients with information, I gained new skills to help my clients be informed decision-makers with autonomy. I worked with community organizations to get vital resources for my clients. I was able to research and create tools for other housing attorneys to use to be better advisers to their clients on multidisciplinary issues, including immigration and bankruptcy.

Within all of the above, I saw again and again how our legal system fails people who are going through the worst times of their lives. In the housing court universe, the power and information imbalance between landlords and tenants is tactically used against tenants. There is a severe lack of funding for housing stability and sustainability, particularly in affluent municipalities. Generally, the law minimizes the personhood of the people it impacts and makes people experiencing compounding traumas and difficult situations feel completely alone and misunderstood.

In secondary education, students often learn of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At the bottom of the pyramid, providing foundational support is shelter, among other physiological needs like air



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

and food. Litigation over something as fundamental and important as housing can sometimes make you forget the basics of what we are dealing with--foundational physiological needs and basic human rights. Everyone deserves their shot at self-actualization, or, if you don't prescribe to Maslow, to happiness and safety. I'm proud to work in housing justice and housing eviction defense and thank Equal Justice America for their financial support which allows me to do this work. I am looking forward to returning to De Novo to volunteer throughout my 3L year at Boston University School of Law.