



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Maria Kaouris
LAW SCHOOL	Columbia Law School
ORGANIZATION	New York Legal Assistance Group

This summer, I had the opportunity to work as an Equal Justice America Fellow with the Domestic Violence Law Unit at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). Over the course of the summer, I worked on matters involving both family and immigration law and had the opportunity to develop my legal research, writing, and client advocacy skills. More importantly, the experience gave me a better understanding of what it means to provide legal assistance to survivors of domestic violence and the many considerations that can shape and complicate legal matters.

One of the most meaningful matters I worked on involved assisting a survivor seeking an uncontested divorce. Throughout the process of working with this client, I was conscious of the importance of creating an environment where we could build trust. Much of the information I had to ask this client was sensitive and hard to discuss. I therefore approached our conversations with care, giving the client space to share their experiences while still ensuring that I gathered the information necessary to move the case forward. This experience allowed me to put into practice one of the skills I had hoped to develop at the beginning of the summer: navigating emotionally difficult client interactions while maintaining the clarity and structure necessary to provide effective legal assistance. Through this experience, I came to understand that building trust is itself an important part of effective advocacy, particularly when the legal process requires a survivor to discuss deeply personal experiences.

The matter also showed me how domestic violence can complicate a legal process that might otherwise appear relatively routine. Because the client had a confidential address due to safety concerns, we had to take additional steps to ensure



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

that the divorce process did not compromise their privacy or safety. Working on the case made tangible something that became increasingly clear to me throughout the summer: for survivors of domestic violence, legal proceedings often carry considerations that extend far beyond the issue presented on paper. Helping a client obtain an uncontested divorce was not simply about completing the necessary forms and satisfying procedural requirements. It was about helping them navigate one part of a much larger process of moving forward.

I also worked on a Special Immigrant Juvenile Status matter involving two children. I assisted with preparing a motion in support of their case, which gave me the opportunity to engage with the intersection of family and immigration law. Before this summer, I tended to think about different areas of law as relatively distinct. At NYLAG, I saw how rarely clients' lives fit neatly within those categories. Domestic violence can intersect with immigration status, family relationships, financial stability, housing, and safety, and a development in one area can have significant consequences in another. Working on the SIJS matter reinforced the importance of understanding a client's circumstances as a whole rather than viewing an individual legal issue in isolation.

My summer at NYLAG also gave me a greater appreciation for the role of an attorney working with survivors. I entered the summer hoping to strengthen my substantive legal skills, but I also wanted to learn how to be responsive to clients' experiences while remaining effective in moving their cases forward. Over the course of the fellowship, I began to understand that those goals are not competing ones. Effective advocacy requires strong legal research and analysis, but it also requires listening carefully, understanding what a client wants from the legal process, and recognizing the practical and personal consequences that legal decisions may carry.

I am incredibly grateful to Equal Justice America for making it possible for me to spend my summer doing this work. My fellowship at NYLAG strengthened my interest in domestic violence advocacy and gave me experiences that I will carry with me throughout law school and my legal career. Most importantly, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute to work that helps survivors and their families navigate difficult legal systems and move toward greater safety, stability, and independence.