



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: It's been two weeks since I started working at Pangea Legal Services in San Francisco. Pangea provides immigration legal representation to individuals in removal proceedings. The organization strives to provide services to the most vulnerable and underrepresented clients, taking on cases that have overlapping criminal and immigration issues and representing clients with mental health challenges and those in detention. It has been an incredible experience to witness tireless lawyering from attorneys who aim to not only represent individual clients but also to more broadly disrupt the criminalization of immigrants.

On my second day, I shadowed an attorney as she responded to an ICE arrest and filed an emergency habeas petition to release the individual. Being able to show up at the San Francisco ICE Field Office and meet with the individual while he was going through one of the scariest moments of his life was incredibly powerful and reminded me of the privilege and responsibility that come with having a law degree. On the one hand, I witnessed how a lawyer could access spaces that the general public, including the client's own family, was not able to access. On the other hand, I also saw how prejudiced the immigration system is against immigrants and their advocates. While we were meeting with our client, we learned that two other individuals had been picked up by ICE, but because these individuals or their families did not call into our rapid response line, we did not have access to their names and thus ICE would not let us meet with them. It was incredibly frustrating to imagine that these individuals were on the other side of the wall, yet we were unable to provide the same services that we were providing to our client who had the fortune of having family members call into our phone line. Witnessing this injustice fuels my desire to continue pushing for systemic change so that every immigrant has access to legal representation.



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This summer would not be possible without the Columbia Law School summer funding program and the generous support of Equal Justice America. I am so grateful for Equal Justice America's funding that allows students like me to work in public interest internships all over the country and protect the rights of others.

Update 2: These past two weeks have been busy! I have been assigned to a variety of cases and have gotten a chance to understand various aspects of the immigration practice. I wrote and submitted a public comment explaining how a proposed rule increasing the information that noncitizens have to share when updating their address with the government would negatively affect our clients. I researched and drafted a country conditions document to support an asylum seeker's application for relief from deportation. I conducted legal research on California juvenile court confidentiality laws and on 9th Circuit cases about Convention Against Torture. I participated in a work permit clinic, helping seven noncitizens apply for their employment authorization card. At first, the variety of projects felt overwhelming; I did not feel equipped to handle the complex legal questions that lawyers entrusted me with researching and drafting, but I have been so grateful for the trust and confidence the lawyers have in me. I already feel more comfortable in my writing and research skills, which I hope will make me a stronger legal advocate.

Last week, I also got a chance to attend a master calendar hearing where I got to understand how noncitizens navigate a legal system that is stacked against them. One of the noncitizens spoke Mam, an indigenous Guatemalan language. The court did not have a Mam to English interpreter, so the individual had to have two interpreters present, one from Mam to Spanish and another from Spanish to English. Although both interpreters were very competent, the information was inevitably diluted as it passed from the judge to the first interpreter and then the second before reaching the noncitizen. The lack of legal representation was also a matter of immense concern to me. Most of the noncitizens who were set to appear on that day did not show up to their hearing and the judge entered an in-absentia order, essentially green lighting their arrest and deportation. If those individuals had had legal representation, their attorneys would have ensured they had received their hearing notice and had been made aware of the risks of not appearing at their hearing. Seeing the lack of legal representation made me understand just how important and life-changing universal representation would be in the immigration space.

Update 3: These past two weeks I have been working alongside community organizers and lawyers to organize a rally outside of the San Francisco immigration court to support our client who will appear in court for a pre-deprivation hearing. The main goal of the rally was to support our client emotionally ahead of a high-stakes hearing that would determine whether ICE could re-detain him. The client was extremely fearful and wanted community support to ensure he



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would not be going through this alone, so we organized and advertised the rally through social media and trusted community groups. It was heartwarming to see how many people who had no direct connection to our client showed up at 7:30 am on a weekday in support. We heard from community organizations about the organizing efforts happening inside immigration detention centers and we got to connect our client's case to the larger movement goals, especially given the recent murders by ICE. Through this process, I was fortunate to learn organizing strategies and witness how lawyers can incorporate systemic advocacy into their practice. I'm so grateful to the lawyers and community organizers who trusted me to be a part of this effort and who shared their strategies with me.

Update 4: In the last few weeks of my internship, I have been accompanying clients to their ICE check-ins. With increasing detention quotas that ICE is trying to meet, certain immigrants, especially those with prior criminal contact or applications that are taking years to be adjudicated, are at greater risk of re-detention. As a result, for clients at high risk of detention, we accompany them to their ICE check-ins to advocate against their redetention and to be able to document and file an emergency habeas if they were redetained. This week, I accompanied a pregnant client, her husband, and their two year old son, to their appointment. When I met them, they were extremely nervous. At their appointment the month before, an ICE officer had refused to push out their next check-in date to after the client gave birth and informed them that the husband would be placed under an ankle monitor for continued supervision. This decision was completely arbitrary, given that the clients had always shown up to their appointments and that there had not been any changes in their circumstances meriting a higher level of supervision. They were relieved to be accompanied by a law student and hopeful that the officer would revisit his previous determination. At the appointment, we were seen by a different officer who initially informed us he would be placing the husband under a high level of supervision, but after some advocacy and providing evidence of the client's pregnancy and of their pending immigration applications, the officer agreed to move out their check-in date to 6 months and to avoid putting an ankle monitor on the client. The clients were so relieved—they told me that their monthly check-in appointments had been weighing heavily on them, both because they had to take time off of work and because they were afraid each time that they would not be returning home. Getting to accompany clients through these stressful moments has been an incredible privilege for me, but it has also been frustrating to see how much more respect clients receive when they are accompanied by legal advisors. For each client I accompanied, there were 50 immigrants in line having to undergo the process on their own.

Final Reflection: Interning at Pangea Legal Services this summer has given me an opportunity to work on a variety immigration cases and has reaffirmed my desire to pursue a career in immigration law after graduation. I am so grateful to the team of attorneys, paralegals, and organizers at Pangea who fight tirelessly every day to defend the rights of immigrants and who



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trusted me to join their team and learn alongside them. Through this internship, I feel like a stronger advocate who is able to fight not just for the individual rights of my future clients but also as part of the larger immigrant justice movement.

As lawyers repeatedly reminded me throughout the summer, this is the worst it has ever been for immigrants in the United States. Throughout the summer, I saw how immigrants' rights were shrinking in small and big ways. It became impossible to win cases in immigration court, because all immigration judges at San Francisco Immigration Court had been fired except for two judges who had 95% asylum denial rates. With a denial at immigration court practically predetermined, lawyers focused their efforts on drafting appeals briefs at the BIA and at the 9th Circuit. I drafted sections of these briefs and incorporated arguments about how the immigration court system is structurally incapable of being unbiased. In parallel, over the course of the summer, I saw the weaponization and nearly unlimited power that ICE wields. I got to shadow an attorney working on a rapid response line, responding to ICE arrests, where I witnessed how ICE kidnaps immigrants during the most menial parts of their days—leaving their home, on their way to work—and the difficulty of getting in touch with immigrants once they are in the detention system. The clients I worked with spoke to me of the fears they experience in their daily lives, that at any point they might be kidnapped and deported to countries they fear returning to. I saw the impact of this on one of our clients' children who I spent time with while their father attended a hearing to determine if ICE could re-detain him and who worried that their father might not be coming home that day. These experiences were heartbreaking and gave me so much admiration for the immigration advocates who are witnessing these injustices on a daily basis and for the immigrants who bravely continue to fight for their right to remain in the US.

Even amidst the horrors of the immigration system, I got to see how much of a difference it makes when immigrants have a lawyer that will fight for them. One of the highlights of my summer was getting to work on a civil lawsuit against ICE to seek justice for a client who suffered life threatening medical consequences from an ICE arrest and subsequent denying of his medical rights in detention. All immigrants should be entitled to legal representation to ensure that they don't have to fight for their rights alone. I am honored to have gotten a chance to see fierce advocacy in action and I am excited to bring these lessons into my work at the Columbia immigrants' rights clinic this fall and in a career advancing immigrants' rights.