



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Aaliyah Pichon
LAW SCHOOL	George Washington University Law School
ORGANIZATION	Southern Coalition for Social Justice

Update 1: This summer, I will be spending 10 weeks with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice (SCSJ) in Durham, North Carolina. As I prepare to enter my 3L year, I wanted to be intentional about immersing myself in all facets of the criminal legal system. I am thrilled to be joining the Justice System Reform Team at SCSJ, where I will have the opportunity to work on impact litigation, criminal defense, parole, and death penalty matters.

My first week as a summer intern with the Justice System Reform Team has been both exciting and educational. Even though it has only been a short time, I have already learned a tremendous amount about the criminal legal system and the work being done to create a more fair and equitable justice system in North Carolina and across the Deep South. During our first SCSJ Lunch and Learn, we took a deep dive into community lawyering, which provided valuable insight into what it means to effectively support and advocate for the communities we serve. The discussion emphasized the importance of building trust, listening to community members, and working alongside them to address systemic issues. Another area that has particularly captured my interest is the death penalty in North Carolina. Learning about the history, legal framework, and ongoing advocacy surrounding death penalty cases has deepened my understanding of the complexities of justice and the profound impact these cases have on individuals, families, and communities.

I am also grateful for the opportunity to learn from professionals who are deeply committed to advocacy and reform. In the short time I have been here, it has become clear that SCSJ is made up of dedicated, passionate, creative, and talented individuals who work tirelessly to defend and protect the rights and liberties of others.

As I look ahead to the rest of the summer, I am excited to continue expanding my knowledge of justice system reform. I look forward to contributing to meaningful projects, learning more about the issues affecting Southern communities, and developing skills that will



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

help me grow both professionally and personally. My first week has already been an invaluable experience, and I am eager to see what the coming weeks will bring.

Update 2: As I complete my third week as a summer intern with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, I continue to be amazed by how much I have learned in such a short amount of time. Working with the Justice System Reform Team has provided me with meaningful opportunities to engage with different aspects of the criminal legal system while learning from dedicated advocates committed to creating a more just and equitable society.

Over the past few weeks, I have had the opportunity to visit jails, courthouses, and prisons while assisting with matters involving clients. These experiences have offered valuable insight into the realities of the justice system and the challenges many individuals face while navigating it. I have also been able to sit in on parole conferences, where I witnessed firsthand the preparation, advocacy, and compassion that go into representing clients seeking a second chance. The clients I have met have been incredibly inspiring. Their resilience, tenacity, and hope despite significant obstacles have left a lasting impression on me and continue to motivate my work.

I have also begun working on my first cases, which has been both exciting and rewarding. Being entrusted with substantive legal work has allowed me to strengthen my research, writing, and analytical skills while contributing to the broader mission of justice system reform.

These first three weeks have reinforced both how much work remains to be done within our justice system and how important organizations like SCSJ are in advancing meaningful change. I continue to be inspired by the passion, talent, and dedication of the legal team and look forward to learning even more in the weeks ahead.

Update 3: I just hit my halfway point as a summer intern with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, I continue to be grateful for the opportunity to gain hands-on experience with different aspects of the criminal legal system. I have had the opportunity to work on matters involving parole, innocence, ineffective assistance of counsel, and juror misconduct. Working across such a range of issues has allowed me to see how different legal doctrines and procedural issues can have significant consequences for individuals navigating the criminal legal system. I have especially enjoyed being able to research and analyze these issues while considering how they fit into the larger circumstances of each case. This work has strengthened my legal research and writing skills while giving me a better understanding of the many ways attorneys can advocate for their clients.

I have had the opportunity to conduct witness interviews and meet with clients, which have been some of the most meaningful experiences of my summer so far. Speaking directly with individuals involved in these cases has reminded me that behind every legal issue is a person and a community whose lives can be profoundly affected by the outcome of a case. Their resilience and willingness to share their stories have continued to shape the way I think about the work we do. These interactions have reinforced for me that effective advocacy requires not only strong



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

legal arguments, but also compassion, patience, and a genuine commitment to understanding the people we represent.

I am so thankful for the experiences, relationships, and lessons I have gained at SCSJ, and I know that the skills and perspectives I have developed this summer will stay with me well beyond my time here. I am excited to continue learning and contributing to the Justice System Reform Team this summer!

Update 4: I have started to reach the point in my SCSJ summer where I am typing up assignments and beginning to close the loop on some of the projects I have been working on throughout the summer. It has been incredibly fulfilling to see assignments progress from an initial question or research task into completed work that can actually be used by the team. Being able to see that process from beginning to end has helped me appreciate the impact that even the smaller assignments can have on larger cases and projects.

I am continuing to make the most of every opportunity to learn from the people around me and contribute wherever I can. These past couple weeks, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with the Communications Team, which has given me a new perspective on advocacy. It is so important to make sure that communities have access to information, understand their rights, and have opportunities to engage with the issues that affect them. Learning about how information is shared with communities and how organizations engage people beyond the courtroom has shown me that effective advocacy requires more than simply doing the legal work.

With the final weeks of my summer approaching, I am particularly looking forward to having the opportunity to participate in my first hearing and to experience firsthand what I have spent so much time watching great lawyers do. I know the remaining weeks will go by quickly, but I am eager to make the most of them and continue developing the skills and perspective that I will carry with me into my third year of law school and beyond.

Final Reflection: My summer with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice was an incredible opportunity to learn, grow, and gain hands-on experience across many facets of the criminal legal system. As I prepared to enter my 3L year, I wanted to intentionally immerse myself in criminal law and justice system reform, and my experience with SCSJ exceeded my expectations.

Working with the Justice System Reform Team gave me exposure to a variety of criminal legal matters, including: criminal appeals, criminal defense, systemic impact litigation, death penalty and parole. I had the opportunity to visit jails, courthouses, and prisons, sit in on parole conferences, conduct witness interviews, meet with clients, and work on substantive legal assignments. I strengthened my legal research, writing, and analytical skills, while also learning how important careful preparation, collaboration, and attention to detail are to effective advocacy and make a meaningful difference in a client's life. Each case presented a new opportunity to see firsthand how the issues I have studied in law school affect real people and communities.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Being surrounded by people who care so deeply about their work made this experience even more meaningful. I learned so much from watching the incredible team of attorneys I worked with approach difficult legal questions, collaborate with one another, and remain committed to their clients. Their creativity and dedication showed me what thoughtful and effective public interest lawyering looks like in practice. This experience extended beyond the Justice System Reform Team as well. The attorneys and staff at SCSJ were generous with their time and willing to share their knowledge and experiences with me. I learned that meaningful change requires not only strong legal work but also ensuring that communities have access to information and opportunities to understand and exercise their rights.

The most impactful part of my summer was getting to know the clients at the center of this work. Their resilience, honesty, and determination left a lasting impression on me and reinforced the importance of approaching every case with both strong legal advocacy and compassion. Another highlight of my summer was getting to participate in my first hearing and speaking in court. After spending the summer watching and learning from experienced attorneys, having the opportunity to advocate in court myself was both exciting and rewarding. It was a moment that brought together many of the skills and lessons I had developed throughout the summer.

I leave the Southern Coalition for Social Justice incredibly grateful for the people I met, the clients I learned from, and the experiences that helped me to become a better advocate. This summer has shaped the way I think about criminal justice and the kind of attorney I hope to become, and I will carry these lessons with me for the rest of my legal career.