



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1:

In the short time I have spent interning with the The Second Look Project, I have already found myself inspired, challenged, and motivated. This summer, I am working on a motion for probation termination, an IRAA motion for early release, and a reentry resource guide for returning citizens.

This opportunity has reaffirmed my interest in post-conviction advocacy and my commitment to ensuring that returning citizens are well supported as they reintegrate into their communities. During a conversation with my first client seeking probation termination, I was struck by his passion for giving back. Already released and active in his community, he dedicates his time to mentorship, sharing his story, and meaningful community engagement. One of the highlights of my internship so far has been drafting the motion for his early probation termination and seeing it successfully granted by the court.

One aspect of the internship that I did not fully anticipate was the emotional weight of the work. Much of what we do involves mitigation and humanizing our clients by telling their full life stories. Many have endured unimaginable trauma, yet it is essential that we present a complete picture of who they are, their past experiences, who they are today, and the future they hope to build. The hope and determination our clients demonstrate make the heaviness a little easier to carry. Many have clear visions for how they want to invest in and strengthen their communities, and it is inspiring to witness the possibilities that emerge when people are given a second chance.

Update 2: Over the course of my career, I have spent a great deal of time building and maintaining partnerships with nonprofit organizations. These organizations often understand



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how cities function in ways that are both unique and frequently overlooked, and through those partnerships, I have gained a deeper understanding of the communities I serve.

During my first year of law school at The George Washington University Law School, I realized how much I missed partnership development work, so I was grateful when my proposal to create a reentry resource guide for The Second Look Project was approved. Over the past few weeks, I have been connecting with nonprofit organizations throughout the DC area that support returning citizens with the resources necessary for successful and sustainable reentry.

It has been rewarding to return to this work and to compare the ways communities address reentry needs in two urban areas I know well: Dallas and DC. While the challenges associated with returning home after long periods of incarceration are significant, I have been encouraged by the dedication of so many nonprofit partners and inspired by the innovative services they provide. These conversations are helping us strengthen connections between our clients and community organizations, expanding the continuum of care available to those returning home.

Update 3: I am grateful for the opportunity to intern at The Second Look Project, particularly for its commitment to providing meaningful, hands-on legal experience. I am currently working alongside my supervising attorney to support a new client who is eligible for relief under the IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) and is also approaching parole eligibility. Rather than waiting to see the outcome of one process before pursuing the other, we have adopted a dual-track strategy and plan to file both simultaneously in hopes of securing the quickest possible relief for our client.

This work has also prompted me to think more deeply about the different avenues available in post-conviction advocacy. Some of our clients pursue relief under the IRAA while simultaneously working with organizations such as the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project to seek exoneration. Observing these parallel legal strategies has underscored the complexity of post-conviction work and the many paths that may exist toward justice.

These experiences have further deepened my interest in wrongful convictions and post-conviction advocacy while challenging me to think critically about the intersection of rehabilitation, innocence claims, sentencing reform, and the many ways our legal system can provide—or delay—relief. Although one-on-one client representation is both meaningful and essential, I continue to find myself thinking about opportunities for broader, system-level change through policy and legislation.

Update 4: Working alongside public interest attorneys this summer has really brought full circle the importance of legal aid and quality representation, regardless of a person's socioeconomic



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status.

One of the ideas I continue to reflect on is the relationship between access and advocacy. Access is more than having a lawyer or a seat in a courtroom—it is having the information, resources, and guidance needed to navigate "the system" and move beyond it successfully. Advocacy is not only what attorneys do for their clients; it is also about equipping individuals with the confidence and skills to advocate for themselves, communicate their needs, and make informed decisions about their future.

My final project at The Second Look Project is to develop a practical, easy-to-use reentry guide for our clients. Although our team is committed to walking alongside returning citizens as they transition back into the community, lasting success also depends on empowering individuals with the knowledge to continue navigating housing, employment, healthcare, identification, education, transportation, and other essential services. By increasing access to clear, reliable information, we can help our clients build agency in their reentry journey and strengthen their ability to work with community organizations and service providers to meet their evolving needs.

Meaningful access to justice extends beyond the courtroom. It includes ensuring that people have the tools, information, and support necessary to exercise their rights, rebuild their lives, and participate fully in their communities. Representation matters, but so does empowerment.

Final Reflection: Overall, this has been a valuable experience connecting coursework to practice. No feeling, to date, compares to drafting a client's final IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) petition and hearing that the government did not oppose it, followed shortly by the judge granting his request to be released from probation. That was my first case of the summer and, because of the length of the process, the only case I was able to fully see through. It is an experience I will always hold dear.

Something unique about IRAA work is the relational investment attorneys have with their clients. Public defense work can sometimes appear transactional, but this experience provided a different view of what pro bono representation can be. Our clients, like many people in the carceral system, have complex histories, and it takes time to unwind and clarify their narratives. Many have faced compounding trauma, including incarceration, and the full picture of their lives can take months to come to light. We are not building relationships only with clients, but also with their families. Conversations with family and friends have been critical to bringing that narrative full circle.



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In the final weeks of my internship, I contributed to IRAA petition packets by contacting family members and friends for letters of support. On its face, this is a simple task, but in practice, it can be time-consuming and involved. As years of incarceration increase, a person's community of support on the outside can decrease—not only because of the distance prison creates, but also because of death, changed phone numbers, and relocation. Most recently, I worked with a client who has been incarcerated since age 20. His older sister was very willing to provide a letter of support and offer her home as his primary residence upon release. Still, she had few others she could recommend who might also be willing to write. Some people she recommended were ultimately unwilling to do so.

Roadblocks like these have taught me more about creative lawyering and the importance of continually tapping into community resources and support. Post-conviction work is not about trying to “trick” a judge into releasing a client. It is about showing that the attorney and client have worked together to build and strengthen a network of support that can facilitate successful reintegration into the community, ultimately for the betterment of the client. This is necessary not only for clients who have navigated addiction or violent crime before or during incarceration, but also for those with innocence claims, given the traumatic nature of prison and the decades of distance from society.

I have also begun thinking more deeply about the different paths available in post-conviction advocacy. Some clients pursue IRAA relief while simultaneously working with organizations such as the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project to seek exoneration. A significant takeaway from this summer is that creative lawyering requires a multifaceted approach—constantly examining a case from every angle. Working alongside other attorneys, including through moots, has allowed me to learn from their insights and ideas and strengthen that approach.

This work has deepened my interest in wrongful convictions and post-conviction advocacy while challenging me to think critically about the intersection of rehabilitation, innocence claims, sentencing reform, and the many ways the legal system can provide—or delay—relief. While the one-on-one casework is necessary, I still find myself drawn to questions of system-level change through policy and legislation, such as IRAA, which has had such a transformative impact on so many.