



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: Another summer as an Equal Justice Fellow, this time at Los Angeles Legal Aid Foundation. LAFLA is such an amazing organization, covering so many services for low-income Angelenos. I am so thrilled to be working on the Unhoused People's Justice Project (UPJP) which does the exact work I've always hoped to do as an attorney: civil impact litigation that directly targets criminalizing policies that harm the unhoused.

UPJP focuses on three primary areas of work: criminalization of homelessness (such as through sweeps and anti-camping laws), parking and towing, and shelter rights. Parking and towing is something there has been little work around, but half of unhoused Angelenos live in their cars. As an outreach worker, I have met so many people in tents and makeshift shelters who told me they used to stay in their car. Often their vehicles were impounded because they couldn't afford registration or to pay the tickets they got from parking overnight. Los Angeles has recently begun focusing extra attention on RVs, with the passage of AB630 on the state level allowing the county to take and destroy RVs they deem to be worth under \$4,000 (the previous limit was \$500). With no safeguards in place requiring a neutral appraiser, there is nothing to stop the county from arbitrarily destroying any vehicle they wish, even if someone is actively living in it with nowhere else to go. When the LA City Council voted to begin enforcing this policy, however, UPJP stepped in, representing the CD 11 Coalition for Human Rights. Their litigation blocked the city, allowing people to stay in the only home they have.

One of my primary projects at LAFLA this summer is working on Know Your Rights trainings and materials for shelter residents. Unlike paying tenants, shelter residents have minimal protection from eviction. Residents often complain of poor sanitation, violence, abuse, and discrimination in shelters, and I have certainly heard this directly from my own clients over the years. The instability of life in shelters and fear or retaliation for reporting abuse is deeply traumatizing and



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makes it harder for people to find permanent housing. It has been powerful to learn more about the protections that are currently in place, and I am excited to share them with more people so they can better advocate for themselves.

I saved UPJP's criminalization work for last because it is the area I have worked the most in and what truly pushed me to go to law school. I have been working with people living on the street for a full decade, starting at syringe services counters at nineteen. I have seen over and over again the devastating effects of sweeps and criminalization, what it means for people to lose everything they own, to face fines or be thrown in jail for having nowhere else to sleep. Working in homeless services showed me a vicious cycle, where the government was paying me to find people housing or distribute life-saving naloxone while paying LAPD and LA Sanitation to disperse people so I could not find them to help them with services and throw away their naloxone and other things they need to survive. Even as a Program Manager for the LA Department of Public Health I was unable to protect people from criminalization. I watched encampments with active COVID cases get swept. The infamous Echo Park Lake sweep was after we had given the encampment a first dose of vaccine but before the second. No matter how much work I did to help people, it felt futile when I had to watch their repeated victimization by harmful systems. The desire to challenge these systems and break this cycle brought me to law school. I have spent these years of school studying constitutional and state law, trying to determine how best to advocate for humane treatment of people living on the street. UPJP is a leader in this work. This week I had an opportunity to attend a hearing in *Garcia v. City of Los Angeles*, a case LAFLA has been litigating for 7 years. In February there was an unprecedented win: the judge granted terminating sanctions, ruling that the city had unconstitutionally seized and destroyed the belongings of unhoused people and fabricated and altered evidence in the case. Now all that remains is what happens to the city next. How do we stop them from continuing these harmful practices? Observing how the attorneys presented their case and made strategy decisions was incredibly interesting and I am proud to have contributed in small ways to such an important case.

Update 2: Almost halfway through my summer at LAFLA! It's been such a great opportunity to be close to so much groundbreaking litigation. I have been working hard on creating know your rights materials for people living in shelters. Because they do not have tenants' rights, shelter residents are incredibly vulnerable and often lose their placements unexpectedly. These lack of protections also make it harder for them to advocate for themselves when there is mistreatment or other issues, out of fear of retaliation and ending up back on the street. I researched the complex, overlapping local, state, and federal laws that apply to these shelters focusing on the areas of habitability, accessibility, discrimination, and residency and on understanding what people can do if their rights are violated.



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Habitability issues like unsanitary conditions can be a big issue in shelters. Interestingly, because Los Angeles has declared a state of crisis for housing, they are exempt from state protections regarding habitability in shelters but we do have our own local laws that ensure people's basic needs are met. Accessibility has robust protections, as shelters are covered by the ADA as well as local and state laws. These laws also require shelters to offer accommodations such as allowing emotional support animals, which is relevant for many people who rely on the support of a pet to deal with the trauma of being unhoused. California has strong protections against discrimination for a long list of protected classes, and while it's legally unclear whether the Federal Fair Housing Act applies to homeless shelters, the California equivalent, FEHA, explicitly does. These laws mean that residents can report actions taken by either staff or other residents to the civil rights department of California in addition to the shelter itself. Finally, while they do not have the same level of protection as tenants, shelter residents cannot be removed from their housing without proper written notice and have access to a complaint process as well as other related rights.

Despite the existence of these laws, we continue to see horror stories of inhumane conditions, abuse, and constant displacement. By training organizers working with people in shelters and providing know your rights cards to residents hopefully we can ensure more people can advocate for their rights.

Update 3: One of the incredible things about working in legal aid and civil rights litigation is being a part of important moments, especially the difficult ones. Over the past couple of weeks my team's work has completely shifted due to HUD's decision to withhold federal funding from LAHSA. This decision bars the County of Los Angeles from receiving over 100 million dollars of federal funding for permanent housing and will result in thousands of people who are currently stably housed being thrown back onto the street. In this moment of crisis LAFLA has done what they have for decades, they have stepped in to fill the gaps by representing the Continuum of Care, which cannot afford to pay an attorney. The situation is chaotic. LAHSA has decided to file a lawsuit, and with HUD funding deadlines looming, it has to be put together incredibly quickly. The Continuum of Care, whose interests have been previously entirely represented by LAHSA must consider its options if LAHSA's suspensions remain in place. The work has been a lot of research on charter amendment processes, unincorporated association rules, and past lawsuits against HUD. I am happy that I can do anything to assist with this crisis and amazed to see the power of attorneys in such a situation. Fighting the heartbreaking consequences of the federal administration's disregard for human wellbeing is an important part of legal aid and civil rights work in this moment and I am honored to be a part of it in any way I can.

Update 4: It's strange to be finishing up my summer at Los Angeles Legal Aid Foundation. The summer absolutely flew by. I met so many incredible people doing such a wide range of work to



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help Angelenos access justice. Everyone I've met at LAFLA has been so welcoming and supportive. During these last few weeks I have been finishing and sharing my summer-long project: Know Your Rights materials for shelter residents. In addition to making a resource for attorneys that covers the overlapping State, Federal, and Local laws that pertain to people living in shelters, I made client-facing materials that can help shelter residents advocate for themselves in termination situations.

Living in shelters can be incredibly precarious and having an understanding of why and how you can lose a placement is valuable to provide a sense of security and protection from removals without reason or due process. I created both a presentation and a zine that details all the rights shelter residents have in California when it comes to termination. Civil Code Section 1954.08 et seq. outlines rights and protections for residents. At intake, participants must be given written information about the termination procedures and how they would receive a termination notice. They must also at some point be given reasons for possible termination in writing. Before a shelter moves to terminate a resident, they must first use and document disciplinary and problem-solving measures that are trauma informed and practice harm reduction. Residents are then entitled to a 30-day termination notice before they are removed and during that time can file a grievance to protest it. They are also entitled to an exit plan, which includes referral and transportation to a new shelter.

The materials I created are meant to ensure residents can protect these rights and contest their removal if these rights are violated. The zine and presentation explain the grievance process, including the levels of appeals, and give residents key information about how to prevent being exited without process because of an absence from the shelter. I had the opportunity last week to speak with someone from our intake line who had been thrown out of a shelter on the spot without any notice or exit plan. Losing this temporary housing caused her to lose her job and she is currently sleeping in her car. I was able to explain the grievance process to her and that it could get her placed in a new shelter if she wins. Hopefully, the materials I built this summer will allow the program to spread this information to more people so they are empowered to protect their rights and keep their housing.

Final Reflection: My last summer as a law student over! I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to work with Los Angeles Legal Aid Foundation. I have been familiar with their work for years. As a street outreach case manager, I frequently referred clients to them, and I still do during my ticket clinic work. LAFLA is often the only option for people living on the street facing legal issues, which are a major barrier for housing. LAFLA's work spans so many essential categories: immigration, housing, benefits and of course—unhoused justice.



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The work that the Unhoused People's Justice Project does is what I have always hoped to do. They practice community lawyering, working directly with unhoused people and organizers to push for the changes they really want. They challenge criminalizing laws directly in court through civil impact litigation. It is these criminalizing policies that brought me to law in the first place after seeing firsthand for years how they destroy people's lives and continue the cycle of poverty and violence.

The Team tackles multiple areas of criminalization, including both street sweeps and parking violations. They are also hoping to bring litigation about shelter rights. Learning about shelter rights through my know your rights project was very interesting, as it was a new area for me. I enjoy doing work that can educate and empower people about their legal rights, but it also showed me all the ways in which the laws are inadequate and vulnerable people lack protection.

I also loved getting to be a part of major work such as *Garcia v. Los Angeles*, a case that has been ongoing for seven years. *Garcia* is such a monumental case, and I enjoyed doing all the small pieces that go into it: research, notes, sifting through declarations and dockets of hundreds of items to find things the attorneys need. It was especially powerful to be there for a hearing and get a better understanding of the hurdles that go into seeking a permanent injunction against a city.

I also got to see how quickly attorneys need to be able to move to react to new issues. During my time there, HUD decided to suspend funding to LAHSA, which jeopardized over 100 million dollars of funding to Los Angeles for crucial housing and homelessness programs. This would do unimaginable damage. My attorney stepped in to represent the Los Angeles Continuum of Care. This required a lot of quick meetings and research to step in as quickly as possible to stop this funding from being lost.

Overall, I am so happy I had a chance to see up close the work that LAHSA does. I can't wait to see what the project does next and partner with them in the future.