



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Lelah Tekhna
LAW SCHOOL	Rutgers Law School
ORGANIZATION	NJ Institute for Social Justice

Update 1: Becoming an Equal Justice America Fellow has strengthened my commitment service, advocacy, and empowerment. EJA has helped me join a community of likeminded law students, all of which are walking in our purpose as future public interest attorneys. As a summer policy/legal intern with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, I have had the opportunity to engage in meaningful research and policy work addressing issues at the intersection of racial and economic justice, most notably through writing memos examining the use of student privacy law as a means of suppressing affirmative action and student civic engagement. Additionally, I have had the opportunity to review bills regarding fiscal transparency and taxation and analyze their impact upon New Jerseyans from all walks of life. The best part about being an EJA Fellow is knowing I have a network of mentors and friends who recognize the necessity of legal aid through direct community impact. Ensuring that everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status or background, has access to counsel is deeply important to each and every person within the EJA Family. I am immensely indebted to EJA for investing in law students like me, who are committed to serving our communities and expanding access to justice. I can't wait to see what's in store for the rest of the summer!

Update 2: I've had the opportunity to work on several meaningful and rewarding projects that have deepened my understanding of public policy and strengthened my commitment to social justice. I've written policy memos exploring the feasibility of increasing taxes on wealthy New Jerseyans, implementing multiyear fiscal reporting, and adopting a current services basis of budgeting. These projects challenged me to think critically about fiscal policy and its impact on equity and government accountability. I also joined nearly 200 advocates and community members to push for increased support for neighborhood revitalization projects and the expansion of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. It was inspiring to stand alongside so many



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

people committed to creating stronger, more equitable communities. In addition, I had the privilege of supporting Institute staff at the Truth & Repair Reparations convening, where I witnessed important conversations about justice, accountability, and meaningful change. I'm incredibly grateful to Equal Justice America for giving me the opportunity to diversify my experience in social justice work, and to the Institute for constantly encouraging me to think creatively about the pressing challenges facing our communities—and for always delivering when I ask for a challenging assignment! I'm excited to continue learning, making new connections, and taking on even more opportunities to challenge myself this summer.

Update 3: As a Fellow with Equal Justice America, I've been able to learn so much about legislation affecting New Jersey residents and what we can do to ensure educational equity for all. One bill in particular (A323), in the hopes of overturning landmark Supreme Court Case *Plyler v. Doe*, seeks to force undocumented students in New Jersey to pay a minimum of \$1,000 to attend public school. If passed, free public education in New Jersey would only be available to legal immigrants, visa-holders and US citizens. Another bill, (A570) seeks to render undocumented students ineligible for in-state tuition at New Jersey institutions of higher education. Together, these bills represent a troublesome trend in attempts to restrict educational opportunities for undocumented youth in K-12 and college. In the last year, much of the federal guidelines and resources designed to protect the rights of English Language Learners has been removed from public view or repealed altogether. States have a responsibility to act and to ensure that all youth have equal access to quality education, wherever public education is offered. Reading this legislation brought me back to my Diversity & The Law paper, which argued that as federal safeguards for English Language Learners are eroded, states and community members must act to ensure educational equity. Proposals like A323 & A570 remind us how quickly what was once considered settled law can be challenged in order to set certain groups back even further. In the face of these challenges, lawmakers and advocates must remain diligent in the defense of educational equality for all.

Update 4: As part of my Equal Justice America Fellowship, I helped lead and organize a group project analyzing how Artificial Intelligence (AI) could impact all four of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice's pillars. I helped coordinate the group's research and discussions while also independently researching and presenting specific concepts related to AI's potential effects on democratic participation, education, surveillance, civil liberties, and environmental justice. My findings reflected my own synthesis of the research I reviewed and a separate conversation I had with Milady Ramos, an Environmental Justice expert and Policy Analyst with the Institute. For my portion of the project, I examined the guiding question: How might AI systems influence democratic participation, misinformation, surveillance, and civil liberties in New Jersey? My research explored both the potential benefits and risks of incorporating AI into civic life. I found that AI could potentially expand civic engagement among communities historically excluded



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

from deliberative processes, but that technology should not replace meaningful human participation. This led me to consider policies that would preserve opportunities for direct community engagement while strengthening media literacy and protecting the public from misinformation. I also researched the implications of AI in education, particularly for underserved students. I examined scholarship addressing the digital divide, algorithmic bias, student privacy, and the commercialization of educational technology. I was particularly interested in how AI could simultaneously provide valuable individualized educational support while worsening existing inequalities if students lack equal access or if schools use AI systems for surveillance. I presented these concerns alongside potential approaches for ensuring that New Jersey students develop AI and media-literacy skills without sacrificing critical thinking or privacy. Another component of my research focused on AI-powered surveillance, including facial-recognition technology and gunfire-detection systems. I examined concerns about false positives, racial disparities, wrongful arrests, and the disproportionate deployment of surveillance technologies in communities of color. This research pushed me to consider whether the claimed benefits of these technologies justify their significant implications for privacy and civil liberties. Finally, through additional research and my conversation with Milady Ramos, I explored the environmental justice implications of AI data centers. Our conversation helped me better understand how the rapid expansion of generative AI has increased demand for hyperscale data centers that can consume substantial amounts of energy and water. I then conducted additional research into how these facilities may affect already overburdened communities through increased utility costs, pollution, water consumption, noise, and pressure on aging infrastructure. This research reinforced for me that AI cannot be evaluated solely as an economic or technological issue; its consequences must also be understood through an environmental justice lens. Leading this group project strengthened my ability to organize collaborative research while independently developing substantive policy analysis. It also allowed me to explore how an emerging technology like AI intersects with each of the Institute's four pillars and, ultimately, with broader questions of racial, economic, and environmental justice.

Final Reflection: Early in the summer, I researched New Jersey legislation affecting undocumented students, including A323, which would require undocumented students to pay a minimum of \$1,000 to attend public school, and A570, which would restrict their eligibility for in-state tuition at New Jersey colleges and universities. Examining these bills alongside the erosion of federal protections for English Language Learners reinforced an idea I had explored in my Diversity & the Law coursework: when existing safeguards are threatened, states and community members have a responsibility to protect educational equity.

I also wrote policy memos examining proposals to increase taxes on wealthy New Jerseyans, implement multiyear fiscal reporting, and adopt a current-services basis of budgeting. I



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

reviewed legislation concerning fiscal transparency and taxation and considered how seemingly technical budget decisions can have very real consequences for New Jersey residents. These assignments strengthened my ability to translate complex policy questions into clear, accessible analysis.

My work also extended beyond research. I joined nearly 200 advocates and community members advocating for neighborhood revitalization and an expansion of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. I supported Institute staff at the Truth & Repair Reparations convening, where I witnessed difficult but necessary conversations about accountability and meaningful change. These experiences reminded me that policy advocacy is most powerful when it is connected to the people it is intended to serve.

One of my final projects brought many of these lessons together. I helped lead a group project examining how AI could affect all four of the Institute's pillars. I organized our efforts and independently researched and presented issues involving democratic participation, education, surveillance, civil liberties, and environmental justice. A conversation with Milady Ramos, an Environmental Justice expert and Policy Analyst with the Institute, particularly challenged me to consider the environmental consequences of AI data centers and their potential impact on already overburdened communities.

The greatest lesson I will carry forward is that public interest work requires both intellectual rigor and a willingness to listen. This fellowship has strengthened my research, writing, advocacy, and collaboration skills, but more importantly, it has shaped how I see myself as a future attorney. I am leaving this summer with a deeper understanding that legal and policy work can be a tool for empowering communities—and with an even stronger commitment to using that tool in service of others.