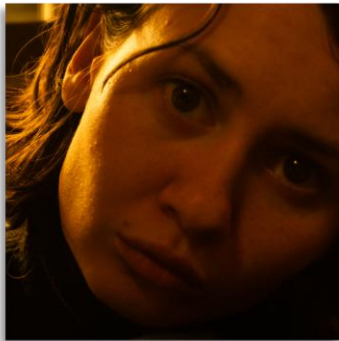




EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Natalie Walker
LAW SCHOOL	Stanford Law School
ORGANIZATION	The Bronx Defenders

Update 1:

How do you draw the line between neglect and poverty?

Many families struggle to afford childcare, housing, or food. They are often the same families who cannot afford a mistake, a crisis, or even asking for help without risking the removal of their children.

I'm excited to be finishing my first week as a legal intern with the Bronx Defenders' Family Defense Practice (FDP). FDP works to keep over-policed families in the Bronx together. I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this work and to learn from brilliant, dedicated defenders every day.

Update 2:

Are you a better parent because you own a blazer?

This week during my summer internship at the Bronx Defenders Family Defense Practice, I had the privilege of meeting a client the day her Child Service's case closed. She was glowing and everyone in the courtroom was proud of her. The judge even put her outfit on record:

"This is the best you've presented in court so far. I think of how you appeared when this started, and here you are today wearing a white dress and a bright blue blazer."

The judge described her appearance as a symbol for her ability to parent, but Maria was dressed up because she was celebrating. It wouldn't have made sense for her to wear a flowing white dress to any of her other appearances. Most days at family court are not celebrations. And many



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

clients don't own a blazer.

Every client I've met has been an incredible storyteller and compelling personality. But the system that takes note of what they wear, whether they leave snack wrappers around their houses, when they fight with their partners, what they smoke—forms of surveillance I'll likely never be subject to—isn't inclined to hear their voices. It listens to people like me who wear blazers and have had the privilege of going to law school.

It's an honor to work with people like Maria at BxD this summer and a great responsibility to tell their stories.

Update 3:

For a parent whose child has been placed in foster care, every day apart matters. But the decisions about when, where, and how parents get to see their children are rarely made with any urgency. Visitation schedules can become tangled in bureaucracy and shaped by well-intentioned paternalism.

Time alone with a parent is not just a visit. It helps preserve a relationship during one of the most traumatic periods a family can experience. It tells a child that their parent is someone they can trust and love. It allows families to hold onto moments of normalcy while they fight to be together again.

At the Bronx Defenders' Family Defense Practice I've been privileged this week to push back against unnecessary separation. BxD works to inject urgency into decisions that too often move at the pace of paperwork instead of the pace of childhood. Every missed visit is time a family can never get back.

Update 4:

Imagine you've lived through years of trauma. You've learned, through experience, that institutions are not there to keep you safe. Then you give birth to a perfect baby. You're ready to take him home, but you're questioned about your mental health and your other children that were taken away from you when you were very young.

You know that every answer you give could become part of a case against you. You don't want to lie, but you answer cautiously. Vaguely. You say you feel like you're being held hostage. People at the hospital act like your crazy to feel that way. Notes are written. Conclusions are drawn. Your distrust becomes "paranoia." The fact that you won't neatly recount your mental health history becomes evidence that you're unstable. They don't let you leave or go to a different hospital. You're separated from your newborn for the first week of his life.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Mental illness is not a defense in family court. More often, it becomes the justification for state intervention. Many experiences can shape the way people respond to authority without making them incapable of loving or parenting their children. A parent who is afraid, guarded, or distrustful is not necessarily an unsafe parent.

One of the things I've learned this summer at the Bronx Defenders is how quickly ordinary reactions to extraordinary trauma can be reframed as evidence against a family. And how important it is to have advocates who insist that a diagnosis—or even the appearance of one—should never substitute for evidence of harm.

Families deserve to be judged on how they care for their children, not on how convincingly they navigate one of the most intimidating systems they'll ever encounter.

Final Reflection:

This summer I interned in the Family Defense Practice at the Bronx Defenders. I had little exposure to courtrooms and no direct services experience, but most days I was meeting with clients and observing proceedings. By the end of my internship, I was writing at a pace I could not have imagined. This internship gave me confidence and vision.

I drafted motions, memos, and examinations this summer. I spoke to clients, attended lectures, and participated in trial skill practica. But the experience that meant the most to me was observing one of my supervisors interact with many different people over the course of my internship. I saw her look at everyone—whether clients and their families or attorneys and judges—with the same curiosity, seriousness, and humanity. She wanted to understand the person in front of her no matter who they were. There was no one she was not prepared to learn from and laugh with. The way she listened to people will forever animate my vision of what a lawyer should be. I was so taken with the work and clients at BxD that I plan to continue working with her as an extern through the school year.

The highlights of my summer were the moments I was able to translate observations into acts that made people feel seen and made an inhuman system that much easier for them to navigate:

One of the first clients I met was a father whose name wasn't on his daughter's birth certificate. His child's mother was refusing to allow him to see his daughter and suddenly challenging his paternity. We spoke to him and my supervisor drafted his declaration in support of his motion to compel visits with his daughter. I had noticed that his daughter's birthday was tattooed on his



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

wrist—I asked him about it and he showed me that he also had her name on his other arm. My first contribution at BxD was adding a couple sentences to the declaration about his tattoos.

We visited another client in a psych ward. Her speech was slow and she had no contact with the world outside. In the week she had been there, we may have been the first people who had given her time to speak and be heard. She was scared that something horrible may have happened in the news. She was terrified that her children were in foster care, a system she had been abused in as a child herself. All she had with her were loose papers—court papers, hospital papers, and scraps where she tried to remember phone numbers to give to her lawyer and different agencies. My supervisor had brought a folder, and I suggested leaving it with our client. It wasn't much, but it was a suggestion I was glad I was there to make. When we left, she was smiling, her speech was more fluent, and the folder gave her just a little more dignity and ease.