



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Margot Pierce
LAW SCHOOL	University of Illinois College of Law
ORGANIZATION	Legal Aid Chicago

Update 1: It's hard to believe that it's already my third week at Legal Aid Chicago! I am grateful to be spending the summer as an intern on the Immigration team in the Immigrants and Workers' Rights Practice Group as an Equal Justice America Fellow.

In the past few weeks, I have already gotten to work on a variety of matters, including humanitarian visa applications, client intake, applications for asylum, and employment authorization renewals. Beyond the knowledge about the law that I've gained so far, I've also had the opportunity to meet and work with a group of attorneys, paralegals, and other interns who share the same commitment to legal aid that motivated me to attend law school. Being welcomed into the Legal Aid Chicago team has reinforced to me the value of legal aid and the necessity of having competent, compassionate advocates working in the field to promote access to justice for everyone.

I'm looking forward to the rest of the summer and the opportunity to take what I learn back with me to the University of Illinois College of Law, especially as I look forward to working with the Immigration Clinic in the fall.

Update 2: As I continue my summer at Legal Aid Chicago as an Equal Justice America Fellow, I am learning a lot about immigration law and interacting more with clients. Direct client service is a big part of why I want to work in legal aid, so beginning to have these experiences has been both eye-opening and rewarding.

One client that I spoke with in particular left an impression on me. I am working on preparing his application to renew his work permit, so I called him to explain the process and ask some questions. At the end of the call, he thanked me for helping him. He told me how much he and his family appreciated the help because having the work permit has made such a big difference in their lives. It is essential to being able to support his children.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

This is why legal aid is important. For many, civil legal aid provides the assistance that prevents them from losing a home, a job, or their family; these are some of the most fundamental pieces of their lives, but under the Constitution, there is no guarantee of a lawyer to help protect them. That is why I have decided to dedicate my time, abilities, and effort to legal aid.

Update 3: One thing that I have been impressed by consistently during my time with the immigration team is the way in which the team works to adapt and respond to frequently changing policy. It doesn't take much for a government memo or policy update to upend our strategy in applying for relief. I've seen how the team has spent time thinking through the best way forward for our clients. Even though it might mean that a previously straightforward or routine application suddenly becomes much more complicated, the team is considering how to give our clients the best chance at the relief that should be provided to them.

My fellow interns and I have listened to some of the discussions working through these changes and have had to pivot on several of our own assignments. I know that in my future career, being able to adapt is a skill that I will need to have and use consistently. Even though it is uncomfortable to be in a spot where we are trying out a new procedure for the first time, I know that this experience is preparing me to be flexible for the inevitable changes that will continue to appear in the field.

I want come back to the story of a client I had written about a couple weeks ago. Based on some policy changes, I needed to call him to explain what had changed and what his attorney's advice is. It wasn't exactly good news, so I was turning the conversation over and over in my head, and I talked to my supervisor about it. In the end, there was nothing to worry about and the conversation went well. However, this will certainly not be the last time that I will be the bearer of bad news for a client. Even when it's hard, I realize that I am learning how to treat clients in these situations with respect and compassion.

Update 4: Something I have really enjoyed and found valuable this summer is the opportunity to work with a team of dedicated advocates. The immigration team is made up of individuals who are each knowledgeable about the area, compassionate towards clients, and devoted to the work. It has made all the difference to be surrounded by people who care about clients the same way that I do, and to be able to ask for help, knowing I will learn something and feel more comfortable with my work each time.

Legal aid work has a real, measurable impact on the lives of the clients we serve. Many clients have experienced serious traumatic events which are often relevant to their legal situation. I have seen how attorneys and paralegals balance the need to ask the necessary questions to help a client with being sensitive and compassionate about a difficult and distressing experience. This takes skill and thoughtfulness in order to ensure that we have a complete picture of a client's situation and the



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

relevant facts. This balance is something that I am aware of and starting to learn as I work with clients on my own.

Final Reflection: My summer at Legal Aid Chicago has come to a close! I am so grateful for the opportunity to work on the immigration team and for everything I learned.

Even though I started law school with the goal of working in legal aid, specifically in immigration, I barely knew anything about the area of law. This summer, I worked on applications for various types of humanitarian immigration relief, including asylum, U visas for victims of crime, and protection under the Violence Against Women Act. This allowed me to learn about each type of application, its requirements, and the ins and outs of the process. Navigating these processes is not easy, and required research and attention to detail. I also learned how to manage my caseload and prioritize tasks based on individual deadlines.

My work this summer reinforced the importance of civil legal aid to me, especially in the area of immigration. Those detailed requirements and long forms which I had a team of experienced attorneys and paralegals to help me decipher? For people like the clients I worked with this summer, navigating these processes on their own and in a language they do not understand would be stressful and very difficult. Our clients are often survivors of domestic violence, were victims of crime in the United States while trying to create a life here or are fleeing persecution in the country that they called home. These individuals, who have already been through so much, deserve the free assistance they need to navigate the system and access relief designed to protect people like them.

Working with clients directly this summer gave me perspective on the real impact that civil legal aid has on their lives. Sharing in the hopeful anticipation which follows submission of an application for work authorization or a prehearing motion reminded me of how the grant or denial of relief affects someone's everyday life. This work makes the difference of whether someone is able to put food on the table for their family or attend a hearing without prohibitively costly travel. The ability to connect clients with a social worker directly at LAC is also an incredible resource; I've seen how that support changes the lives of clients and their family, whether it is access to food, housing, or healthcare. Legal aid can be truly holistic.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not emphasize my gratitude to those who made my summer experience possible. Equal Justice America funded my summer work and offered me a network of legal aid professionals to connect with. The immigration team at LAC is supportive, competent, and positive despite an ever-changing landscape of immigration work. Special thanks to Jacob Snodgrass for his insights and support this summer, and to PinYi Lee, Natalia Medina, and Maggie Thomas for navigating this summer together as interns!