



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2026

EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



NAME	Mykal Pacheco
LAW SCHOOL	UC Davis School of Law
ORGANIZATION	Open Door Legal

Update 1: I am honored to share that I have been selected as an Equal Justice America Fellow for Summer 2026.

Through this fellowship, I will be spending the summer at Open Door Legal doing employment law work focused on helping workers understand and assert their rights. Under attorney supervision, I will be assisting with client intakes, reviewing employment records, organizing facts and timelines, researching legal issues, and helping draft materials related to workplace disputes, including potential wage-and-hour, retaliation, discrimination, and benefits-related claims.

This work reflects a major reason I came to law school: to use the law as a tool for equity, access to justice, and meaningful support for people navigating difficult systems. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue building my path in public interest law through direct service and advocacy for underserved communities.

Thank you to Equal Justice America, Open Door Legal, and University of California, Davis - School of Law for helping make this summer of public interest work possible.

Update 2: I have been reflecting on how much legal aid work depends on careful listening. This summer, I am working with Open Door Legal on employment law matters. Much of the work involves helping people tell the full story of what happened at work: reviewing records, organizing timelines, identifying potential legal issues, and thinking through how the facts connect to the law. The work can be technical, but it is also deeply human. Behind every



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

paystub, email, personnel document, or intake note is someone trying to understand what happened to them and what options they may have.

One thing this experience has reinforced for me is that access to legal help can change the way a person experiences a problem. Many workers are not only dealing with lost wages, retaliation, discrimination, or uncertainty about their rights; they are also dealing with the stress of trying to navigate those issues alone. Legal aid helps create a space where people are heard, believed, and supported as they decide what to do next.

This fellowship has allowed me to continue building the skills I came to law school to develop: listening closely, organizing facts clearly, researching carefully, and using legal tools in service of people who may otherwise be left without meaningful support. I am grateful to Equal Justice America for helping make this work possible and to Open Door Legal for giving me the opportunity to learn through direct service.

Update 3: I want to share a more specific window into my work this summer at Open Door Legal.

A significant part of my work has involved helping review and organize employment-related records for workers seeking legal help. In employment cases, the facts are often spread across many places: paystubs, schedules, text messages, emails, personnel documents, termination notices, and the client's own memory of what happened. Under attorney supervision, I have helped turn those pieces into clearer timelines and case notes so that potential claims can be better understood and evaluated.

That process has shown me how difficult it can be for workers to advocate for themselves when the information they need is incomplete, confusing, lost in mountains of paperwork, or controlled by the employer. A person may know that something felt wrong at work, but not know whether it was unlawful, what records matter, what questions to ask, or even what options may be available. Free civil legal services helps bridge that gap.

One of the important parts of this role is to be aware that the "small" details are often not small at all. A date on a termination letter, a missed final paycheck, a denied accommodation request, or a pattern in time records can carry real consequences for a worker's income, housing, health, and family stability. Taking those details seriously is part of what makes legal services meaningful.

Update 4: This summer at Open Door Legal, I helped work on a Social Security overpayment waiver matter under attorney supervision.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

The client was told they owed money back to SSA, but the record has been anything but straightforward. There are old notices, unclear calculations, prior waiver activity, missing documents, and conflicting information from SSA about what was waived, what was denied, and what balance may still be owed. Even after calls with SSA, it has not been clear exactly how the agency reached the amount it says remains due.

My work included helping organize the timeline and draft an advocacy letter asking SSA not to require repayment. A major part of that work was trying to piece together what happened from incomplete records: when the overpayment was assessed, what notices were sent, what SSA representatives later said, whether some amounts were already waived, and why the remaining balance is still unclear.

Projects like this show how hard it can be for someone who does not have legal aid to navigate an overwhelming system. Especially for those who rely on public benefits for basic stability. It is difficult enough to respond to an overpayment notice. It is even harder when the agency record is confusing, the explanations are inconsistent, and the person is left trying to figure out whether they actually owe the money being claimed.

That is one reason legal aid matters. In a case like this, advocacy means slowing the process down, reviewing the record carefully, identifying what is missing, and making sure the client is not treated as if the debt is simple or obvious when the history suggests otherwise.

Final Reflection: I came into this fellowship having already spent a significant amount of time doing public interest work, so this semester did not introduce me to the importance of serving low-income clients or suddenly convince me that this is the work I want to do. What it did was give me a deeper appreciation for how difficult that work can be when a client's problem does not come with a clean set of facts, a complete record, or an obvious solution.

One of the matters I spent time on involved a Social Security overpayment. The basic question seemed simple: why did SSA say our client still owed thousands of dollars? Getting an answer was anything but simple. We were working with incomplete records, prior waiver requests, conflicting information from SSA representatives, and calculations that were difficult to reconcile. At one point, even an SSA representative could see information suggesting that some amounts had previously been waived but could not explain why the remaining balance was still being collected.

That matter stayed with me because it showed how much of the burden of an administrative system can fall on the person least equipped to untangle it. Our client was being told that



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

money was owed, but getting a clear explanation of why required phone calls, records, timelines, and legal advocacy. My role was not to manufacture certainty where there was none. It was to organize what we actually knew, identify what was missing or contradictory, and make the strongest argument we could from that record.

I saw the same dynamic in much of my employment work. I reviewed pay records, time sheets, text messages, personnel files, termination documents, and other records to determine whether what a client remembered could be proven and whether what an employer claimed actually matched the documents. Sometimes the most important development was not discovering a perfect piece of evidence. It was finding one document that confirmed part of a client's story, noticing that two records did not line up, or turning months of scattered events into a timeline that finally made sense.

Those may not sound like dramatic victories, but this semester made me appreciate how meaningful they can be. For someone who has spent months trying to explain what happened to them, simply getting the facts organized and taken seriously can matter.

This fellowship sharpened skills I know I will continue to use: being precise about what the evidence actually shows, being comfortable admitting what we do not know, and still finding a way to advocate effectively. More than anything, it reinforced for me that good public interest lawyering often happens in that uncomfortable space between the story a client knows happened and the imperfect record available to prove it.