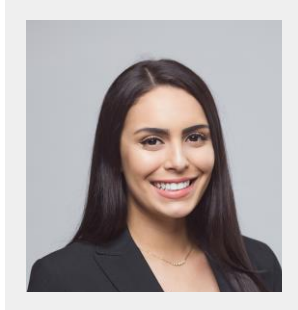




## Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Lizette Valles

**Law School:** Santa Clara University School of Law

**Organization:** Bay Area Legal Aid

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### Week of June 15<sup>th</sup>

A few months ago, I was awarded an Equal Justice America Fellowship. EJA is recognized as a national leader in providing opportunities for law students to work with organizations that deliver civil legal services to those most in need of meaningful representation.

Three weeks ago, I began my summer work for Bay Area Legal Aid. At Bay Legal, I work with a team of brilliant and passionate attorneys who have dedicated their professional careers to advocating for those who have been pushed to the margins of our society. As a first-generation American, and the daughter of immigrants, I am proudly working in the Immigration Unit.

The protests prompted by the horrific killing of George Floyd have again exposed, among other things, another avenue of legal vulnerability our clients face. With federal agents like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deployed to support law enforcement efforts at protests, non-citizens are presented with the unfortunate reality that their participation to support the #BlackLivesMatter movement must be weighed by the consequences of potential detention.

When my supervising attorneys requested our team create a "Know Your Rights to Protest as a Non-Citizen" resource piece, I rushed at the opportunity to learn how our clients can be protected without sacrificing the desire to stand and march with the BLM movement.

Quick info interjection: If you or anyone you know faces this concern, point them to the Immigrant Legal Resource Center's "red card," which is available in 9 languages, and offers a quick list of rights and defenses non-citizens can assert during encounters with ICE.

While the current circumstances create additional challenges for our clients, I am honored to be able to serve them as an EJA Fellow and work to bridge the gap of inequality and access to legal services.



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I recognize there are so many organizations in need of your donations at this time, and it is not at all my intention to detract from the support they should be receiving, but I hope that you will consider supporting Equal Justice America in their efforts to place future lawyers in the arena most in need.

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## **Week of July 6<sup>th</sup>**

My experience as an Equal Justice America fellow in the Immigration Unit at Bay Area Legal Aid has been a rewarding experience to say the least. Just last month, SCOTUS declined to hear the Trump administration's challenge on California's sanctuary law and a few days later, upheld DACA! The news brought brief relief to our unit as we continue to advocate for people who need these laws and programs most.

I saw the impact our work has on our clients after I helped my supervising attorney submit a temporary immigration status application for a domestic violence survivor. And now, our team is drafting a comment to voice our objection to the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice's proposed regulations which would effectively eliminate asylum for most asylum seekers.

Without fellowships like EJA, I would not know how rewarding it feels to be a part of our clients' journeys and to be able to contribute in the advancement of the policy matters that make our systems more just.

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## **Week of July 27<sup>th</sup>**

As an Equal Justice America Fellowship at Bay Area Legal Aid some of my more meaningful experiences this summer have been during client and prospective-client interactions (over the phone due to COVID-19, of course). Two stand out in particular.

Spanish is my native language so when I was first asked to translate legal advice from an attorney to her client, it seemed like a simple task. It was not until the end of the conversation, when the client expressed deep gratitude for my assistance, that I appreciated the significance of what that meant to her. It was another reminder of how access to legal services and meaningful legal representation is, regrettably, not the same for everyone in this country. The simple expectation of being able to effectively and confidently communicate with your attorney is not guaranteed to every immigrant in need of legal services. Providing translating services to this client was one example of how Bay Legal works to bridge the access gap, and I am so grateful that I was able to play a small part in this effort.

Another meaningful experience came from my interaction with a prospective client from Nicaragua. During her initial interview, I was asked to take notes on her immigration history as my supervising attorney asked her questions. We learned she came to the United States twenty years ago with absolutely nothing but her infant daughter. Given her circumstances at the time, she had to leave her



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son behind with family. I felt a growing lump in my throat, and even now as I recall her story, when she began to cry at the thought of not having seen her son in twenty years. We took a moment of silence before my supervising attorney compassionately and gracefully assured her we were going to do everything possible to help her with her case.

While these clients may not remember that one law student on the phone, that one time, along the long journey to legal permanent residence, I will never forget the gratitude nor the sorrow in their voices. Gratitude and sorrow lined with unrelenting hope.

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## **Week of August 10<sup>th</sup>**

When I chose to commit my time this summer to public interest work, I did so with the desire to serve marginalized members in the Bay Area community while eager to gain clarity on the complexities of our legal system. I close my summer with somewhat of a disillusioned sense that while the legal system contains within it structures that can protect the marginalized, it often fails to do so. At the same time, I end my summer with the encouragement of knowing my work in the Immigration unit at Bay Area Legal Aid had a direct impact, whether big or small, on the clients I helped serve.

Immigration law can change constantly and quickly, the process of legal advocacy in this field is slow and arduous. While I may never know if the seven clients I worked with this summer get their visas approved or if they will ultimately find themselves on a path to citizenship, I do know they have a voice. The advocates at Bay Legal work tirelessly to make certain of this.

As I begin my second year of legal studies and work, I carry with me a more profound appreciation for public service. An appreciation I hope to apply in my next chapter as a federal judicial extern this fall.