



## Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Sidonia Mitchell

**Law School:** The University of Texas School of Law

**Organization:** Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

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

I'm nearly three weeks into working at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, which means it's time for an EJA Fellow Update. For those who may not know, TRLA is one of three primary legal aid organizations in Texas, providing civil legal services in 68 counties from El Paso to Austin to Corpus Christi, including the Laredo area and the Rio Grande Valley. There are about 2.6 million people in this area eligible for TRLA's services – that's a ratio of about 21,000 potential clients for each legal aid attorney in Southwest Texas. In law school, we approach problems as if everyone has access to legal counsel, but the reality is that millions are unable to afford legal representation and are not guaranteed access to counsel in civil matters.

Although I grew up familiar with the vulnerability of areas like greater Houston to natural disaster, I did not learn until recently that natural disasters are particularly common in the Valley, and the poor drainage infrastructure in the area exacerbates their effects. And, of course, in any location, low-income communities are more likely to bear the consequences of a natural disaster: they are more likely to live in environmentally vulnerable areas such as floodplains, where land is cheaper. Much of the work I have done so far has been related to these systemic issues of environmental injustice.

This is a crucial time for legal aid organizations, with more people becoming eligible for representation by legal aid and needing legal services due to the current recession. I've been fortunate enough to receive support for my work from the Justice Center at The University of Texas School of Law and Equal Justice America, both of which make it possible for law students like me to assist in providing free legal services.

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

As of this week I'm more than halfway into my summer internship, so an EJA Fellow Update is in order. I'm currently deep in legal research to evaluate potential claims homeowners may have for poor



construction of their homes or development of their lots, and to help a survivor of abuse obtain a valid order in a family law case.

As I research, I notice how often a winning argument is one that not even most attorneys would produce without extensive (and usually expensive) research. In so many cases, someone's rights hinge on an argument like this, and their ability to enforce their rights shouldn't be contingent on their ability to pay for legal representation. Law school has lots of opportunities to refine our research skills, but experiential learning is crucial because it allows us to develop these skills in the context of actual practice - and hopefully to contribute to a favorable outcome for a real client.

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### **Week of July 27th**

Despite working remotely this summer, I've had many of the experiences that I hoped for during my summer at TRLA, including observing proceedings in federal court and having the opportunity to meet (virtually) attorneys with a wide range of experiences in legal aid and discuss their careers. One of the benefits of working at such a large and innovative organization is the opportunity to meet and learn from these talented and dedicated advocates, both through remote training sessions and informal virtual meetups.

Through assignments I've been working on, researching consumer claims for clients has been a great opportunity to develop legal research and writing as well as factfinding skills. So much can go into ensuring that a client's claim has the best chance reasonably possible of succeeding, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to work on different components of these cases.

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### **Week of August 10th**

A final EJA Fellow Update - time flies! As I wrap up my assignments, I have been so grateful to have supervisors who made themselves so available and supportive. TRLA has worked hard to ensure that summer interns received meaningful work experience, client interactions, and mentorship even during this challenging time. I am so thankful to the leadership there for making (virtual) space for us to get to know some of the brilliant advocates who have dedicated their careers to justice.

During my summer internship, I have received support from The University of Texas School of Law and Equal Justice America, which works tirelessly to enable law students to complete internships providing free civil legal services.