



Summer 2020 EJA Fellow:



Name: Joseph Romero

Law School: University of Virginia School of Law

Organization: Manhattan Legal Services

Week of June 15th:

As part of my fellowship with Equal Justice America, I will be posting updates every couple of weeks.

This summer I will be working with Manhattan Legal Services, a borough chapter of Legal Services NYC, the nation's largest civil legal services provider. Roughly 1.7 million city residents are currently living below the poverty line—a mere \$25,000 for a family of four. On one of the richest islands in the world, 85% of Manhattan Legal Services clients live on less than \$15,000/year. We at MLS fight poverty and seek racial, social, and economic justice for low-income Manhattan residents by providing free legal representation, systemic advocacy, and community education.

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been working to protect the housing rights of our clients. With the economic and health devastation brought by COVID-19, it is urgent now more than ever that no one be denied safe and stable residence.

Week of July 6th:

Over the past few weeks, one difficult reality of working in civil litigation within underserved communities has presented itself.

When either filing a suit on behalf of a client or defending her from one, the party on the other side is often someone just as impoverished and someone who, too, has been neglected by systemic failures. Fighting in those circumstances to assert a client's legal right can feel like inflicting a moral wrong on someone else. In housing court, there are small-time land-owners who demand rent from clients unable to pay due to the pandemic, but those small-time land-owners are struggling to get by as well. In family court, there are cases where both sides have been hurt and it feels morally impossible to weigh one hurt against the other.

In a separate conversation this past Friday, an attorney at Manhattan Legal Services passed along an analogy that likened the American legal system to a sinking ship. The ship is imperfect, with holes all over, and its passengers have been flung into the ocean. While it is necessary to rescue the engineers



and maintenance-crew from the waters so that they can fix the ship, it is also necessary to save the normal folk who are also at peril. The attorney compared rescuing the engineers and maintenance-crew to fixing the system, and rescuing the normal folk to rescuing those who have been failed by the system. The American legal system must be reformed, and those efforts are not misplaced, but every person victimized by it deserves a life-jacket. That's the fight of direct civil legal representation.

There is comfort in knowing that, at the end of the day, both sides are able to tell their story, speak their truth, and assert their rights before the law. The American legal system is far from perfect, and it is unfortunate that at times it pits those whom it has most victimized against each other. But when rights have been violated or are under threat, it is important that they are defended, no matter how imperfect the law can be.

Week of July 27th:

Big thank you to Manhattan Legal Services for pushing through with their summer internship program despite the added uncertainties and difficulties to navigate through in a suddenly remote work world. I hope that whatever I've learned over the past couple of months, I've been able to return in value to MLS and its mission. I now know that legal research can be surprisingly and personally rewarding when used to identify the theories that can guide conversations with clients and enable both client-and-advocate to tease out the facts supporting the case. My supervising attorney and I made good progress in a number of family law and housing cases, and I'm hoping to leverage my experience at MLS in more pro-bono work this upcoming semester.

Week of August 10th:

Final update! I just started my second year of law school. This semester I'm looking forward to applying the lessons I learned in my summer with MLS. The direct representation focus of MLS provided many opportunities to be an active participant in the attorney-client relationship and grow through interviewing and counseling skills development.

And as a discrete law-based example of value transferability, one of the first cases I worked on with MLS was one that implicated the Fair Housing Act. Today, I began work where I will be drawing from that experience to support a new clinic client.

Thank you Equal Justice America for helping fund my summer with Manhattan Legal Services.