



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: June 15, 2021

This is the first of four brief updates that I will share about my time in the Asian Outreach Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services, where I am grateful to be spending the summer as a legal intern.

With just over a week of experience at AOU, I have frankly seen enough to renew my disappointment in how our society fails its most marginalized members. The community served by AOU seeks help in a wide range of matters, but underlying most requests is a common desire for stability. People want to know if their next paycheck will come in or be withheld by an employer, and if their decades-old neighborhood will be bought up, torn down, and re-developed after each and every resistant household is evicted. Clients want to know if they will still be able to afford their rent after the COVID moratorium ends, and if the families and lives they've built against all odds will be torn apart by deportation to Cambodia or Vietnam. Stability in housing, work, family, and life is something many of my friends take for granted every day, but not everybody has that luxury.

I came to law school to learn how to make a difference for people by understanding how movements are made. At AOU, I'm learning how our laws sometimes support and sometimes fail America's most vulnerable residents and how some of us can step up to listen, learn, organize, and try to help. I'm seeing firsthand how legal services, community engagement, and movement lawyering can make a difference for people who really need it.

Update 2: July 2, 2021

This is the second of four updates about my summer in the Asian Outreach Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services, where I am almost halfway through a legal internship (which is hard to believe! the time is flying by).

A few days ago, I finished Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The novel bowled me over with how beautifully written it is, how much I resonated with its stories of people caught between worlds, and how



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stunning it is to see Young explore happiness, sadness, and love through letters written from a son (nicknamed Little Dog) to his mother. But setting aside my book recommendations, one line that really made me think about my work at AOU comes when Little Dog writes the briefest paragraph to his mom:

"Tell me where it hurts. You have my word."

There are a few different things he could mean by this. He probably means "You can trust me" and maybe "I want to try to help" or even both, etc. But in the context of the novel, he probably means, at least in part, for "word" to mean "language." As we learn more and more about the difficulties of navigating America without English, it becomes clear that offering "your word" to somebody who is in pain can mean a great deal.

All this to say that I have been struck in the last few weeks by how much AOU helps Greater Boston's Asian communities by offering and promoting language access.

Last week, I sat in on a state legislature hearing where constituents and representatives spoke in support of a bill to transliterate candidate names on election ballots (lest a would-be voter get to the polls and find that they cannot recognize the name of their preferred candidate).

This week, I dug deeper into the Title VI compliance documents that a Massachusetts public housing authority (PHA) uses to inform its language access policies. Federally funded programs cannot discriminate on the basis of language, which is a form of national origin discrimination, and these residents have found that they have nobody to call in the PHA's office to report issues—issues like being stuck with your garbage for weeks because the written notice of the trash schedule change was only in English.

Beyond these particular projects, AOU itself provides language access to legal aid. While GBLS has always used interpreters to mitigate language access barriers, it's clear to me that AOU's presence—that is, the presence of a unit dedicated to Asian and Asian immigrant communities—serves as a magnet and a welcome mat for potential clients who might not have otherwise called on GBLS for help.

When anybody at a legal aid organization says "Tell me about what's happening in your life. You have my word that we will see what we can do," I think it means a lot. But I think it means even more when "giving your word" means giving not just your promise but also your language and voice to a person who previously felt disconnected, isolated, and voiceless. AOU really lives and breathes the aspect of community lawyering that says "Use your voice by lending it."

Update 3: July 16, 2021

Update number three from my summer in the Asian Outreach Unit of GBLS!



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In the last couple weeks, I've begun working on cases fighting the deportation of Southeast Asian community members,* and what I've been struck by most is the range of emotions that you have to be prepared for. It's incredibly sobering to work with a client who is facing the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being torn from their partner, children, siblings, and life as they know it and taken forcibly to, for example, Cambodia—a place where they may only have lived in as an infant (so not even "setting foot" there) or where they may have spent fewer years than they spent in a refugee camp in Thailand where, in turn, they still spent fewer years than their decades making a life in the United States. This is obviously mind-boggling, and also mind-boggling to me is that *close to 30 percent of deportations in Massachusetts concern Asian immigrants, which is exceedingly high consider I hear so little about the impact of deportation raids on Asian communities (so support formal and informal racial data equity campaigns!)

It's also incredibly challenging—at least in my internal monologue—to wrestle with communicating options, relief possibilities, and hope, on the one hand, while bearing in mind the consequences of failure and the emotional toll of giving somebody false hope.

I've also been incredibly humbled by the resilience of clients living under these circumstances. I don't want to romanticize their resilience, but I want to acknowledge how challenging it must be to manage the mental health consequences of remaining relaxed (for yourself, your family, your friends, your work, etc.) while under the extreme tension of these removal orders.

Entry 4: August 8, 2021

I've nearly reached the end of my time interning at the Asian Outreach Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services, and that means this is my fourth and final update for the summer. Working at AOU has been a fantastic experience, if a sobering one. I cannot recommend direct services enough to my law school friends. Legal work is too often associated with big, monied parties vying for power and dominance using legal tools, our tools. Our profession associates too much prestige with that kind of work, and too little with the work done to help our society's smallest, poorest members. While legal services and AOU's community lawyering are neither glamorous nor profitable work, I believe they are the right kind of work.

My first update this summer came from a pretty bleak and somber place: "With just over a week of experience at AOU, I have frankly seen enough to renew my disappointment in how our society fails its most marginalized members." What I had seen in that week was how our clients—who are Boston's poorest and most vulnerable Asian residents—were seeking help with such basic matters as their paychecks, housing, health insurance, and ability to stay with their families. They were seeking mere stability under societal conditions that left them vulnerable to tremendous instability, disruption, and need.



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Today, I still feel the same bleakness and somberness about our society that I felt at the beginning of the summer. Our society really, really does callously fail unthinkable numbers of people every single day. The difference for me now, ten weeks later, is that I've spent a summer going at its problems, trying to help a few of these people and the families. With my amateur legal skills and my metaphorical pail, I've been trying to bail out this boat and understand how people can empower themselves to plug the gaps that society doesn't care to fill. In the future, whether I'm doing direct service work or something else, I will never forget what it felt like to be in this position.

If I remember one thing from my property class in the spring, it's the idea that we should not judge a country by its lofty spires and towering domes but by its dark alleys and damp cellars. To gauge the happiness of America by its "most splendid edifices" and "greatest profusion[s] of wealth and concentration[s] of capital" is to be foolish and willfully ignorant. Only by considering our poverty problem, our wealth gaps, and our racialized strata can we understand the true measure of what our society's "prosperity" is really worth.