



Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: There are precious few rights that poor people can realistically defend for themselves. While you have the right to an attorney when you are charged with a crime, you may be met with one who has hundreds of other clients to keep up with, one with little time to consider your needs, or one with little experience. Our nation's underinvestment in public defense also means that people facing non-criminal court proceedings often do not have the resources to adequately defend themselves despite the fact that their cases can have consequences that are just as devastating as those in criminal trials. Losing one's home or family can be devastating, and can happen without the defense of an attorney. I am so grateful that the tenants' rights movement in New York has successfully advocated for the right to counsel in housing court proceedings. Whether a tenant is being accused of nonpayment, accused of nuisance, or being evicted through no fault of their own, they can now be zealously defended by an experienced and dedicated attorney at no cost. I am grateful to work with some of these talented attorneys at the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem in their Housing Defense Practice, and I am hopeful that the right to counsel will be expanded to include even more types of proceedings so that poor defendants can have a fighting chance in protecting their rights!

Update 2: For most attorneys, open and frequent communication with clients is the key to effective representation. What, then, is an attorney to do when their client has a hard time communicating? Clients of civil legal services organizations are often dealing with myriad issues, and their legal concerns might be the least important on their list. This can make it very challenging to determine the legal strategy that will serve the client's best interest. This summer, I have served clients who do not have telephones, clients who are not fluent



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in English, clients who have memory loss, clients who do not have privacy to discuss legal matters, and more. It can be difficult and frustrating to try and get such clients to contact me on my terms. However, I have found that it is much easier to meet these clients where they are. If a client has severe anxiety around speaking on the phone, I'm happy to send an email. If a client has mobility concerns, I can easily take the train to their apartment. Although her office is closed, I am happy to meet a client in the building if they need a neutral and private space to talk about their concerns. Being a civil legal services provider means working around all of the systemic barriers that my clients face day to day so that they can still have the privilege of fierce advocacy. Thank you for supporting me in my effort to pursue justice with my clients!

Update 3: Justice-impacted clients are rarely dealing with only one issue at a time. For instance, when someone becomes incarcerated, their housing is threatened, their income is threatened, their custody of their children and status of other familial relationships are threatened, and any other number of issues can arise. It is enough of a hassle for a client facing all of these issues to chase down one overworked public interest attorney, but having to work with one attorney for each case can be extremely overwhelming and time consuming. This is why I am so grateful to have worked with a community defense organization that provides representation to clients for a wide range of cases. Each attorney works with the others in their practice and all of the other practices to keep open communication with clients and create legal strategies that will have the best overall outcome for the client. Before a criminal attorney encourages a client to take a plea, they will consult with a housing attorney to ensure that the ensuing conviction will not result in an eviction. In order for a housing attorney to argue for a larger apartment accommodation with a landlord, they may consult with a family attorney to ascertain the specific needs of the client's children. Instead of a client being required to juggle all of their legal responsibilities in their own memory, the organization representing them can instead lighten the load. The result of this system is better representation all around and dramatically better outcomes for clients.

Entry 4: I am so grateful to have gotten to spend my summer with the attorneys and clients at the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem. I was thrilled to be able to represent clients on the record in court and craft legal arguments from relevant case law, but by far the most rewarding part of this summer experience was getting to know the clients and working to get their goals met. I am glad to have had a hand in relieving clients of the burdens of extreme rent arrears, have helped them fight to keep their housing, and have worked to get the repairs needed to make their housing livable once more. Ultimately, I am proud to have spent my summer moving the needle closer to making housing a universal human right.