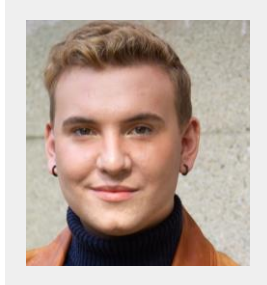




## Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



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**Law School:** University of Pennsylvania

**Organization:** Street Democracy

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**Update 1:** Before starting my first year at University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, I was convinced I'd need to rely on my own personal grit and resolve to make it through. I didn't think I'd meet anyone interested in relational organizing here, much less abolition or liberation - I think I sort of accidentally postponed all my faith in community-building.

Thankfully, however, my assumption was proven resoundingly incorrect. My classmates and I spent the entirety of last semester calling for police and prison abolition in Criminal Law. This summer, as I complete an Equal Justice America Fellowship with Street Democracy working alongside my classmate and comrade Nimo Ali to advance Street Democracy's community-based legal strategy to transform the systems of oppression that constitute our current legal regime. I'm spending time connecting with former clients of the organization and learning more about what that transformation will look like. Even today, I'm co-working on Zoom alongside other wonderful and radical law students who are working to redistribute power away from the capitalist elite.

As it turns out, I am surrounded by comrades who share a common vision for our equitable, accountable, anti-capitalist and anti-institutionalist future. It is in this community that I am finding the resolve it takes to keep working towards that future. I am very grateful for that.

Right now, I'm working on a research project to open up possibilities towards a youth organizing legal strategy targeting barriers to enrollment for students experiencing homelessness in Michigan.

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**Update 2:** I appeared in court for the first-time last week!

So far, my legal education has dealt heavily in abstractions: what is the theoretical function of this tome on tort reform? How many different ways could we interpret this contractual provision? Offering my one brief component of our argument felt like transitioning away from those abstractions and back into reality. I valued the learning I did last year, but I am glad for this turn.

As a person who believes the courtroom is structurally incapable of resolving harm, I do not necessarily want to celebrate this milestone. Institutions that use state force or the threat thereof to deliver "justice" do not



transform systems or address the root causes of harm. Instead, I want to offer gratitude to our client and the team at Street Democracy for giving me a chance to practice and learn.

For now, our courts still convene over Zoom: after a semester of anxious cold calls, unmute-button-nerves are a familiar specter. This was, though, a first step in the process of demystifying anti-carceral legal work.

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**Update 3:** I think I've actually started looking forward to Mondays. As part of my fellowship with Street Democracy working with high school students on a legal project to reduce educational barriers for families experiencing homelessness. I have my weekly check-ins with our team of youth advocates on Mondays, and it is such an energizing way to start off my week.

Now, I'll be focusing in on a research project that will take all the energy I can give it. Engaging with legal scholarship last semester at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School was certainly educative, but I don't think I expected just how much work goes into writing an article. I keep thinking I've finally understood a quirk of the statutory scheme we're investigating, and then I find an argument suggesting something else entirely.

Honestly, though, I really enjoy questing through Westlaw and combing through articles. I came to law school in part because I felt legal practice was a good match between the needs of the movement for social justice and my very nerdy set of interests. I am happy to report that I am putting all three of my library cards to good use.

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**Entry 4:** Does anyone besides lawyers actually like our justice system?

The first work I did with Street Democracy was quantitative research on public opinion of Michigan courts. Unsurprisingly, the results were not only poor - they were condemning. I combed through hundreds of stories about judges harvesting fines and fees for their salaries from people with no choices left.

This is the last week of my Equal Justice America Fellowship with Street Democracy, and although I'm very happy my client's case was dismissed, it felt preposterous to beg a stranger not to incarcerate a man she did not know. I don't think people hate courts because the court system is broken - I think people hate courts because the court system is working as designed to keep people down.

Over the last several weeks, I have been working with a team of Michigan public school students on a research project investigating barriers to education access for homeless students. Recently, we began assembling a public-facing organizing strategy, one that will help us make a difference for homeless families not by hoping a judge will be nice but by building the power that young people have when they come together. It is so exciting to see all the puzzle pieces we've been working on fit together.

I want to find ways to move the needle without relying on the goodwill of a system we all despise. That's why I treasure organizing so much: to me, organizing means claiming our collective power and turning it to good. I am so glad Equal Justice America and Street Democracy have helped me connect my passion for relational organizing with community-based lawyering. As I look towards my 2L year at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, I feel energized by the lessons I've learned this summer, and more convinced than ever that I'm on the right track.