



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

LEGAL SERVICES FELLOWSHIPS

Summer 2021 EJA Fellow:



Name: Jordan Woodlief

Law School: University of Virginia School of Law

Organization: Legal Aid Justice Center (Charlottesville, Virginia)

Update 1:

I have now been interning for Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) in Central Virginia for 3 weeks, and I could not be happier. As an organization, LAJC provides civil legal services for indigent Virginians AND engages in community organizing and advocacy efforts. I believe being able to build power in these different ways is key to achieving justice for those in poverty, and I am so grateful to be interning for an organization that shares the same view.

Civil legal aid organizations like LAJC are vitally important, providing needed services for our neighbors and fighting for justice against systems of oppression. Without the work of attorneys, community organizers, staff, and even interns, communities would struggle to access civil legal services that are desperately needed. I am fortunate to have received a summer fellowship from Equal Justice America (EJA), which I and many others can rely on to support our summer legal internships with civil legal aid organizations.

Update 2:

It feels like the last two weeks have flown by, busy with the excitement of new case assignments and projects. In particular, I have been working on a 7-year-old asylum case, which was filed before my supervising attorney even worked at LAJC. The client's file was full of notes and filings from previous attorneys and legal interns, but her case has made practically no progress in immigration court – she does not even have a hearing before the court right now.

Despite the fact that our client does not have a hearing date yet, I have been researching country conditions and starting to write her brief, because a hearing notice can come at any time. However, as I was drafting the brief, the law changed overnight. Since 2018, when former Attorney General Jeff Sessions released



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

LEGAL SERVICES FELLOWSHIPS

decisions in *Matter of A-B-* (2018) and *Matter of L-E-A- II* (2018), asylum claims based on gender, family, and/or gang-related persecution have been under fire, despite being viable for years prior. Attorneys have had to maneuver around the dicta of these decisions and others released by former Attorney Generals Jeff Sessions and William Barr, developing carefully-worded brief arguments to maintain hope for their clients' claims. However, on June 16th, Attorney General Merrick Garland released two decisions, *Matter of A-B-* (2021) and *Matter of L-E-A-* (2021), which effectively dismantled the findings of the original *Matter of A-B-* and *Matter of L-E-A- II* decisions. The new standard under these decisions is favorable to our client and others who are seeking asylum claims on the basis of gender, family, and/or gang-related persecution, but a lot of the work by previous attorneys and legal interns based on the old standard has been undone.

It can be discouraging to see your client stuck in a loop of uncertainty, with relief out of reach and the law changing every day – you have to stay positive, organized, and ready to adapt. I am grateful to EJA that I have the opportunity to develop these skills, which are valuable to being a successful public service attorney, while I am a law student.

Update 3:

Before I started law school, I worked as a paralegal for two different immigration law firms, both focusing on direct client services. I really enjoyed building relationships with clients and being able to celebrate their success with them, but I longed for the opportunity to create change in the sphere of U.S. immigration law. Being eager to change the status quo, I joined immigration advocacy efforts in my community, fighting to support immigrants in sanctuary, to end the local jail board's cooperation with ICE, and to educate others about new immigration laws. I have still engaged in these advocacy efforts in law school, and I knew that I wanted to choose a summer internship that would give me exposure to a career where immigration advocacy played a role.

Consequently, it was a no brainer to accept an internship with the Immigrant Advocacy Program at Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC). Just in the 2021 Virginia General Assembly session, LAJC helped to: repeal the law that requires state mental health facilities to screen their patients' immigration status and report immigrants (documented and undocumented) to ICE; remove barriers and extend opportunities to youth applying for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status up to age 21; make it easier for immigrant victims of crimes to receive a "U" Visa; severely limit ICE from using DMV data related to the recently enacted Driver Privilege Card for immigration enforcement uses; and make in-state immigrant students eligible for certain forms of state-funded financial aid for college.

Now being in this internship, I could not be happier with the work I get to do, and I aspire to do this work as an attorney. I have been able to draft a practice advisory on one of the new laws passed during the General Assembly session and to work to close down a local detention center. Obtaining this confirmation of the kind of work that I want to do professionally has been incredibly valuable, and I am grateful to EJA for the opportunity to explore these aspirations.



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

LEGAL SERVICES FELLOWSHIPS

Update 4:

The past 3 weeks since my last update have been full of opportunities to engage in entirely new work. Even though I worked in immigration law for two years before law school, I never had the opportunity to draft a motion to redetermine custody. This motion is uncommon, even for immigration attorneys, and the legal standard is unclear. Having pored over Board of Immigration Appeals administrative decisions, Circuit and District Court decisions, research articles, academic studies, and the client's documents, I have drafted a motion from scratch, in service of a detainee who deserves another bond hearing and to be released. This work has felt incredibly rewarding, knowing that I have put forth my best effort to help someone be released from dangerous detention conditions during a pandemic, while also improving my researching and writing skills in a formal setting.

As my internship is winding down, I am reflecting on how much experience I have gained in this position. Whether I was drafting an entirely new motion, engaging in legislative advocacy, or providing direct services to clients, my work during this internship was meaningful and exactly what I want to do after law school. I also have been able to develop relationships with my supervising attorneys, other staff members, and community leaders, including with those in different field offices throughout the state of Virginia. I can rely on these relationships for advice and assistance as I am making my way through law school and the post-graduate job search, for which I am thankful. Ultimately, I am grateful to EJA that I could take this summer to explore this area of work and confirm my intended path. If you want to help me and other law students have the opportunity to explore careers in public service law through summer legal internships with public service employers, consider donating to EJA.