



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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### Update 1:

I am so thankful to EJA for the fellowship because it gives me the opportunity to get involved in urgent efforts to assist Afghan asylum seekers to stay legally in a safe country.

I consider myself a news junkie, checking headlines throughout the day from multiple apps to get perspective on current events. Of course, I was alarmed in August of 2021 when the Taliban took over in Afghanistan. There was so much uncertainty regarding evacuations and the safety of people there. But so far removed from that hemisphere, the events were just headlines.

At my EJA sponsor organization this past week, I have met with people who fled Afghanistan in the days and weeks after the takeover. They made it to America with military assistance and eventually settled in Houston. I was sitting across the table from someone who looked into my eyes and told me “I fear my life will be in danger if I go back.” In that moment, mere headlines turned into an individual who needed my help.

The Afghans being assisted through my sponsor organization have loved ones still in Afghanistan, all the while the refugees are here finding a place to stay and a job for basic expenses. Through working with my sponsor organization, I can play a role in helping these individuals seek and maintain legal status in the US, on their path to a safer future.

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### Update 2:

How do you help someone when you don't share a language or cultural background? It seems insurmountable, but there are tools to help immigration law professionals work effectively with people seeking asylum from other parts of the world.

In addition to a strong network of interpreters and translators, It's important that legal professionals devote time to developing cultural competencies for the countries, cultures, and religions of clients. This facilitates the interviewing and application process by anticipating and understanding a client's expectations of gender and authority roles and setting expectations for the working relationship. This effort also is likely to play a large role in building arguments for a client's asylum or refugee case. The more information the legal staff understands



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about a client's situation, the more information can be assembled to demonstrate the likelihood of threats and risks the client will experience upon return to their home country. Country conditions can change quickly and will vary widely between clients. It's important to be aware of issues regarding the status of women, LGBTQ people, the treatment of people who had roles with a previous established government, tribal identities and practices, and different religious groups and their practices vis à vis the group in power.

With all of these tools in play, how can you tell if you're making an impact? No interpreter is needed for the simplest of communications: a hand over the heart conveys gratitude from the client and from the legal staff, empathy for the client's experiences.

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## **Update 3:**

Last week, I had the opportunity to assist my team at a US Citizenship Workshop. The goal of these workshops is to work with people who want to fill out their application for US citizenship so they can submit them on their own. We received thorough training before applicants arrived, so we'd be prepared for guiding someone through the application form.

The person I worked with was a young woman from South America who had been in the US for several years. She has two little ones of her own, and enjoyed telling me about how the older child is an angel and that the younger one is a handful (complete with helpless eye-rolls!). She asked if I had ever visited her country because it has so many beautiful natural areas and beaches. I haven't yet, so I added it to my dream travel list.

The application form for US citizenship covers a lot of biographical information, as well as serious and intensive questions about a person's past and their intentions in the US. We addressed these questions carefully and thoroughly, but I came away with the memory of how pleasant the time we spent working together was. Our conversation also prompted me to take the free sample citizenship test on the USCIS website so that I could see what her next steps might be like (I passed with flying colors, but some made me think a little harder!).

I'm proud to have been part of a small step in her journey to citizenship because it made me reflect on my own citizenship and the rights and privileges that come with it. The past few weeks of my internship have been filled with helping asylum seekers with very difficult trauma experiences get established in the US. It was encouraging to help people at the citizenship workshop because I could get a hint of the end goal for our Afghan clients. The common experience between me and the people we help is seeking a safe and free place to thrive.

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## **Update 4:**

Imagine being persecuted in your home country and just managing to escape to the US with one or two family members and the clothes on your back. You have no access to your personal documents, like a passport or forms of ID. The US military brought you to safety at a stateside military base. Where do you go from there? Who can you trust to help you with groceries and a place to live, much less your new immigration status?

My internship placement this summer is with a non-profit organization which has taken a leading role in assisting Afghan asylum seekers in Houston, TX. The individual circumstances of our asylum seekers vary widely, from young single individuals to large families, from former Afghan military to government officials. The one thing they have in common is persecution by the Taliban government and fleeing to the US for their safety.



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When reaching out to these potential clients, we often hear that they don't know who to trust because so many other legal offices are contacting them. The main advantage we have regarding credibility is that we don't charge fees for helping with immigration processes. Anyone who needs help can just ask us. Immigration applications generally come with hefty price tags, even more so for large families who need to file for each family member.

Organizations like mine and EJA provide critical services and funding to bridge the gap to legal services for people in crisis like Afghan asylum seekers. Without these organizations providing funding and making it possible for law students like me to work with them, hundreds of people in this area may have their immigration status adversely affected simply due to lack of resources. I have never met people more deserving of a chance to be safe and thrive in a new country.

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## **Update 5:**

I have been honored to work at Catholic Charities' Cabrini Immigration Center this summer, helping the legal team provide critical immigration services for Afghan asylum seekers. It has been an incredibly impactful experience in demonstrating the limited resources available for asylum immigrants and the level of demand for services. In the two years since the Taliban took control of the Afghan government, our clients have been in the United States under some version of temporary protected status. As we approach the two-year anniversary, conditions in Afghanistan under the Taliban have only worsened and our clients are in the process of renewing their status so they can remain legally in the US. These next few months will be crucial for the Cabrini team to achieve completed applications and approvals for the Afghan asylum population in Houston.

The cases I've assisted with have varied widely, but the clients have in common a genuine fear of grave harm if they return to their home country. This fear is based around their roles in the former Afghan government, their roles in supporting the US military presence, their race or ethnicity, their political beliefs and activism, and even their close family relationship to people in these roles. A common refrain among our Afghan clients is "I will be kidnapped, tortured, and killed if I return to my home country."

Cabrini resources have been maximized by the availability of myself and the other interns this summer. The boost that our staffing hours have added have made it possible for the majority of clients referred to us to be contacted and routed to the appropriate staff. This jumpstarted the application processes for hundreds of clients and their families. We've helped update and organize data so that clients and their families can be prioritized by status expiration dates.

I am so thankful for the opportunity this summer to support asylum seekers. My participation in the Cabrini intern program wouldn't have been possible without my fellowship funding from EJA. The experience has also strengthened my commitment to public service through practicing law and narrowing the access to justice gap for communities.