

Equal Justice Works Fellows

By partnering with Equal Justice Works, a nonprofit that runs the largest legal public interest fellowship program in the US, we have had the good fortune to sponsor more than 30 exceptional fellows at legal services organizations. These fellowships address the shortage of attorneys working on behalf of traditionally underserved populations and help create the next generation of public interest attorneys. Our current fellows are featured in the following pages.



Rio Scharf

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2020–2022
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights
San Francisco, California

Rio's fellowship at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area takes aim at the criminalization of poverty, the process by which our criminal legal system punishes people for lacking financial resources and, in doing so, further perpetuates their poverty. A key aspect of this process is criminal legal debt. Our legal system encumbers people with fines and fees and then penalizes them for failure to pay. The amount of debt this generates is staggering: 10 million people in the United States collectively hold about US\$50 billion of criminal legal debt. And these debts inhibit people's opportunities to find employment, housing, and stability long after they complete their prison sentences.

Rio's project seeks to both decrease the amount of monetary sanctions imposed on people and help those already struggling with criminal legal debt. Accordingly, Rio provides legal services to those facing monetary sanctions and those who already hold debt and are defending themselves in debt-collection proceedings. Rio litigates cases that seek to change how jurisdictions address the imposition and collection of criminal legal debt. Additionally, Rio engages in public education and coalition efforts that promote local policies that impose fewer costs on defendants and curb egregious debt-collection practices.



Travis Fife

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2021–2023
Texas Civil Rights Project
Houston, Texas

In the fall of 2021, Travis began his fellowship at Texas Civil Rights Project in Houston, Texas. His project addresses the criminalization of children's behavior in school across the state. Every year in Texas, more than 16,000 children are referred from the classroom to a police officer. Tens of thousands more are suspended, expelled, or pushed into alternative disciplinary schools for nonviolent, ordinary adolescent misbehavior. As a former teacher, Travis knows all too well that for every instance of exclusionary discipline, a student becomes less likely to graduate and more likely to become incarcerated. As a result, disproportionately high numbers of Black, Latinx, and other children of color are deprived of a chance to succeed.

Travis's project engages in affirmative litigation to enforce existing state and federal rights to combat the rampant harsh treatment of children of color in these matters in schools. Specifically, Travis seeks cases to curtail police involvement in routine school matters that teachers are better equipped to handle. Additionally, Travis engages in community organizing by providing legal support to parents, teachers, and kids. This includes know-your-rights trainings, sending demand letters, filing public records requests, and giving kids the resources they need to feel empowered in school.



Audrey Hertzberg

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2022–2024
Sanctuary for Families
New York, New York

Audrey began her fellowship in fall 2022 with Sanctuary for Families (SFF), where she has expanded SFF's EMPOWER Center, making it the first medical-legal partnership in New York City that provides family law representation to survivors of human trafficking. Estimates for the population of trafficking survivors in NYC are in the thousands, yet only 338 cases were reported and confirmed in 2020. This disparity reflects a fear among many survivors that, by coming forward, they risk violent retaliation from their abusers and losing custody of their children. Being able to access an interdisciplinary team of anti-trafficking attorneys who can address essential family law issues is critical for trafficking survivors and their children.

Through her fellowship, Audrey combats gender-based violence by providing representation through direct services, training to expand the network of legal support available, and policy advocacy to combat institutional discrimination against survivors in removal and termination of parental rights processes. Audrey's fellowship also includes family reunification for formerly incarcerated survivors and resources for collateral civil legal services related to surviving abuse.



Hetali Lodaya

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2022–2024
Legal Aid of North Carolina
Durham, North Carolina

In fall 2022, Hetali began her fellowship at Legal Aid of North Carolina’s Right to Education Project. There, she primarily works with low-income special education students and their families, who have faced significant barriers to accessing appropriate educational services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These students are at the greatest risk of continuing to fall through the cracks.

Although individual advocacy is necessary to protect their rights, it has more limited impact in transforming systems to serve all students equally and equitably. For this reason, Hetali’s project takes a two-pronged approach, combining direct representation work with community-based lawyering. She advocates on behalf of individual students and families in North Carolina’s Wake, Durham, and Robeson Counties, supporting them in accessing testing, services, and other rights guaranteed by state and federal special education laws. Simultaneously, she works with community-based organizations in these counties that are interested in building their collective power and achieving systems-level change for the delivery of services related to special education.



Mason Gates

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2022–2024
Legal Aid of Arkansas
West Memphis, Arkansas

Through his fellowship with Legal Aid of Arkansas, Mason addresses Black land loss and helps create generational wealth in the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas. Mason does this by resolving clouded titles created by heirs’ property. Heirs’ property occurs when land is passed without a valid will — an issue that disproportionately affects communities of color, making the land ineligible for private and governmental financial support, subjecting families to eviction and loss of land, and depriving them of critical intergenerational inheritance and wealth transfer.

Mason’s fellowship includes a combination of direct legal services as well as community education and capacity-building. Mason provides direct legal services to heirs’ property clients in the Mississippi Delta, helping to clear titles on land and write wills for underrepresented communities so that additional heirs’ property is not created. He also focuses on community education, helping families access federal and private funds and monetize their property. Additionally, Mason seeks to secure funding to establish a permanent heirs’ property program in Arkansas, with the goal of bringing additional lawyers to the region and helping revitalize the community.



Asiyahola Sankara

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2022–2024
ACLU of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

Asiyahola began his fellowship at the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California in fall 2022. His project addresses the most policed activity of everyday life: travel on our transportation systems. In Los Angeles County, adjudication of transportation-related penalties often occurs outside formal criminal court, without counsel, in privatized citation processes or kangaroo courts where the citing agency is prosecutor, judge, and jury. Yet the penalties are severe: spiraling debt, lost licenses, lost vehicles. Thus, the simple act of traveling carries consequences that can seriously impact well-being, especially for Black, Brown, and unhoused people, all of whom are disproportionately targeted by police.

Through legislative advocacy, direct litigation, and outreach, Asiyahola combats wealth-stripping and criminalizing transit and traffic enforcement practices that restrict the mobility, economic opportunities, and health of local communities. He also advocates for alternative transportation system resources that will better keep communities safely mobile and thriving. He provides dedicated legal support to coalition campaigns led by transit riders and grassroots organizations that represent communities disproportionately impacted by discriminatory transportation policing. In addition, Asiyahola provides direct representation to individuals facing transportation-related fines and fees.



Uruj Sheikh

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2022–2024
NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund
New York, New York

As a fellow at NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Uruj challenges discriminatory voting laws in the Deep South. In 2021, state legislatures met the historic turnout of Black voters and voters of color in 2020 with a backlash of voter suppression laws aimed at diminishing the political power of voters of color. Nineteen states enacted 33 restrictive voting laws in 2021 alone; 49 states cumulatively proposed over 425 bills to restrict voting access. These sudden and extreme changes to voting laws have the intent and effect of making voting more burdensome for low-income voters of color. Characterized as Jim Crow 2.0, these laws deepen historical inequities in voting access, abridge or deny voters of color a meaningful opportunity to participate in the political process, and throw off the guardrails necessary to maintain our democracy.

Uruj’s project ensures that every eligible voter can freely exercise their fundamental right to vote. Her strategy includes using targeted litigation to enforce voting rights protections under federal and state constitutional and statutory protections; employing rapid response advocacy at polling stations by monitoring for suppression and identifying organizing and legal interventions; and advocating for expansive legislation and against restrictive voting bills in partnership with grassroots coalitions.



Chris Shenton

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2022–2024
Southern Coalition for Social Justice
Durham, North Carolina

Chris's project at the Southern Coalition for Social Justice (SCSJ) challenges "administrative disenfranchisement" in the democratic process, reframing issues of election administration from harmless administrative errors to serious barriers to the democratic process. Mistakes in election administration are popularly conceived of (to the extent they are conceived of at all) as trivial glitches that balance out in all but the closest elections, which are protected by careful and deliberate recounts. But, in reality, these administrative disenfranchisements pose a threat to voting rights, one that is disproportionately experienced in communities of color and poor communities.

Chris uses a variety of legal strategies, including public records requests, trainings for both community groups and elections staff, state and local administrative advocacy, and litigation, as well as outreach to community groups and election administrators, to ensure that the experiences of voters are factored into the decision-making calculus for designing and administering election systems. Beginning at the county level in North Carolina and Florida, Chris's project at SCSJ builds infrastructure specific to issues of administrative disenfranchisement, in order to guarantee that our systems of democracy are animated by a truly democratic ethic. Chris's fellowship is co-sponsored with Clorox.



Jason Davidson

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2023–2025
Lawyers Serving Warriors
Washington, D.C.

Jason's fellowship at Lawyers Serving Warriors, a pro bono project of the National Veterans Legal Services Program, focuses on outreach to US veterans to inform and assist them with Combat Related Special Compensation (CRSC) claims. CRSC provides an additional tax-free monthly benefit through the US Department of Defense to help retired or disabled veterans support themselves and their families.

Veterans who served in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan frequently suffer from debilitating illnesses or cancer caused by exposure to burn pits due to the smoke created by burning trash, medical waste, asbestos, and other chemicals. Although a law passed in 2022 enables veterans to obtain CRSC for these conditions, few people are aware of this eligibility, and many veterans groups tend to focus on VA benefits.

Through his project, Jason will educate the veterans' community about the new eligibility for CRSC, assist veterans in obtaining the benefits to which they are entitled, and address other systemic issues causing improper denials of CRSC. He will engage in administrative and legislative advocacy along with impact litigation to confront inequities between the service branches.



Andrew Feinberg

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2023–2025
Human Rights First
Los Angeles, California

Andrew will begin his fellowship in fall 2023 with Human Rights First, where he will dismantle systemic barriers for indigenous asylum seekers from Central America. Indigenous peoples face racial discrimination and state-sanctioned violence throughout Latin America, yet they are routinely denied asylum in the United States at a greater rate than other populations.

Despite numbering in the thousands, indigenous asylum seekers suffer from a lack of interpreters and may be more likely to miss deadlines or make errors in their applications, and often endure multi-year delays in their cases. Of the fifteen most common languages in immigration court hearings conducted in 2018, three were indigenous Mayan languages. Additionally, immigration attorneys tend to be less familiar with the experiences of indigenous populations and thus less likely to make the strongest claims possible for their indigenous clients.

Through his fellowship, Andrew seeks to eliminate language barriers by expanding interpreter networks and publishing legal guides and pro se materials in indigenous languages. In addition to representing indigenous asylum seekers directly, Andrew will also organize community outreach events and know-your-rights presentations as well as lead training for pro-bono lawyers.



Serena Hughley

Equal Justice Works Fellow, 2023–2025
Louisiana Center for Children's Rights
New Orleans, Louisiana

In the fall of 2023, Serena will begin her fellowship with the Louisiana Center for Children's Rights (LCCR) in New Orleans. Through their partnership, Serena aims to reduce Louisiana's transfer of children to adult prisons and advocate for improved conditions for incarcerated children.

In Louisiana, children as young as 14 years old can be prosecuted and incarcerated in the adult system. The state adopted a juvenile transfer plan in 2022 and transferred additional children from juvenile custody to the notorious adult prison, Louisiana State Penitentiary or "Angola." Regardless of their path to adult prison, children who are incarcerated with adults endure increased risks of physical and psychological abuse as well as decreased access to their constitutionally mandated rehabilitative treatment.

Serena's project looks to challenge the transfer of children to adult prisons in Louisiana. First, the project aims to litigate the state's new juvenile transfer plan. Second, the project seeks to provide post-disposition advocacy to children in adult prisons. Specifically, this advocacy will center on education, visitation, medical care, solitary confinement, and abuse complaints. Finally, the project will produce practice guides and know-your-rights training for lawyers and others.