

August 30, 2016

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My experience in the 2016 Allegheny County Bar Foundation Summer Fellowship Program was very beneficial and quite enjoyable. I completed my Fellowship at the Allegheny County Bar Foundation Juvenile Court Project. The mission of the Juvenile Court Project is to advocate for indigent parents whose children are involved in Juvenile Court dependency and termination of parental rights proceedings.

Parent Advocates are instrumental in making sure parents are offered the appropriate services in a timely manner. Once families become involved with the Juvenile Court system, it can be a difficult process getting the courts out of their lives. It often becomes standard to order parents to attend: assessments, mental health treatment, drug and alcohol treatment, random drug screens, parenting classes, domestic violence classes, family based therapy, visits with their children, and to agree to allow in-home services into their home, all while maintaining stable employment. While families can benefit from all of these services, realistically, it is not always possible to access and complete all of this programming in a timely manner, without the advocacy of a Parent Advocate.

During my time at the Juvenile Court Project, I worked specifically with dependency law in the various stages of the process by attending hearings, reviewing petitions, drafting pleadings, representing clients in the courtroom, attending Family Planning meetings, engaging in contact with clients, and researching case law on prominent issues.

When parents are making an effort towards reunification and progress with completing their goals, it is rewarding to help them through the process, particularly when the children want nothing more than to be home with their parents. One family stands out to me. A single mother of five children became involved with the Juvenile Court system due to truancy. Mother was subsequently ordered to attend a psychological assessment. With little background information other than what she received from the County Children, Youth & Families caseworker, the doctor diagnosed mother with personality disorder not otherwise specified. Based on this diagnosis, she recommended not returning the children to mother's care. It is not the intention of the Juvenile Court system to use someone's "personality flaws" as a

basis for continued removal of their children. I am not aware of the outcome of this specific case, as it had not returned for review prior to the end of my fellowship. However, I am grateful I had the opportunity to contribute to this case. For numerous other clients, I drafted and argued motions for increased visitation or return. Through my Fellowship experience, I learned that without the work of Parent Advocates, it is likely that fewer families would be reunified.

Sincerely,
Kristi N. Heidel
Duquesne University