

August 21, 2012

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II - Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My name is Janee Phillips and I spent my summer working with the Juvenile and Special Education Law Clinic at the University of the District of Columbia as an Equal Justice America fellow.

As a summer intern with the Juvenile and Special Education Law Clinic I worked with several clients on a wide range of issues. The most interesting part of my summer was watching how different areas of law and different attorneys can work together for the best interest of their mutual client. Over the course of the summer, I was able to attend a number of hearings at the District of Columbia Superior Court. Although we did not represent our clients in the various cases they had there, as the educational advocates we were able to use our experience in a completely different area of law to make persuasive arguments about the motivation behind their behaviors, the benefit of utilizing the school system to rectify those behaviors rather than the court system, and the impact that a failure to provide necessary supports within school can have on a student in other areas of life.

Many of my clients were parents of or students with disabilities. Some were very familiar with the special education system, while others were just beginning the process of special education eligibility. One of the families I worked with had two children who the Clinic represents. The students are sixteen and eighteen years old. One has experienced many challenges to her mental health and spent most of the summer between her mother's home, a shelter house, and psychiatric institutions. My work for her over the summer involved attempting to get evaluations that the District of Columbia Public Schools had authorized during the previous school year and attending hearings with my supervising attorney. The other is a student who has been struggling academically. She was supposed to graduate this past school year but was unable to do so. My work for her this summer included trying to enroll her in Project Search, a program run by D.C. Public Schools, D.C. Department on Disability Services, and the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services which allows students with disabilities to gain employment experience in their last year of high school. We also did some advocacy on her behalf to address the failures of DCPS to comply with the IDEA. Later in the summer we attended a person in need of supervision hearing with her. We wrote a letter to the judge explaining that we believed it was the failures of D.C. Public Schools that explained her absenteeism and that the school system would be a better avenue to address the problems than the court system.

During this summer I was also able to attend a discipline hearing for one of our clients. My supervisor encouraged me to actively participate in that hearing so I was able to do our opening statement and direct examination of witnesses. I also helped another client who was just beginning the special education process. This client had been expelled from his charter school the previous school year. He was then enrolled in D.C. Public Schools where he was sent to CHOICE, the school for students who have been suspended or expelled from a DCPS school where he ended the year. In the summer, we worked to find him an alternative school placement for this school year and to begin the eligibility process. Both he and his mother were very against him attending his neighborhood school. During the summer, I researched charter schools along with his mom and he was eventually enrolled in a school that both he and his mother were ultimately happy with. I also worked with both DCPS and his new school to begin the special education referral process. I requested that the school evaluate him. We then received an independent evaluation which I forwarded to the school and then I requested an eligibility meeting. Once he was enrolled in the new school I contacted the special education coordinator and requested the same. We are now in the process of setting up a meeting with his school to discuss his educational needs for the upcoming semester. Another student I worked with has a severe disability and is attending a school that is ill-equipped to work with him and has failed to provide any of the services which he needs. This summer, I worked with the school to advocate that he receive the services he needed. When school officials were unwilling to give them, I sent a letter to the supervisor at the Office of the State Superintendent of Education that oversees his particular school. I also drafted a due process complaint to address some of the schools failures. I also researched alternative placements for him, and began the application process for a private school that will be better able to fulfill his needs.

Ultimately, I greatly enjoyed working at the Juvenile and Special Education Law Clinic. The work that we were doing was interesting and engaging. I felt like I was able to get substantive legal experience and was able to learn more about what lawyering really is. I also believe that many of our clients need the advocacy we do. Many of these students are very intelligent, but are struggling and often times it is because they are not getting what they need from school. It is sad and frustrating to see a student who refuses to go to school because they get nothing out of it through no fault of their own. I believe that the work I did this summer has and will have an impact on each of the students I worked with and I am very grateful to have had that opportunity.

Sincerely,

/s/

Janee Phillips
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