

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My weeks at CLS have been enlightening and enlivening. Having direct client contact and putting a human face on the law has made me satisfied with my decision to go to law school. It's absolutely wonderful to do advocacy, and have even the barest vestige of authority to make that advocacy actually yield results somewhat immediately. I've gotten to apply and hone the research and writing skills I learned at school, which is a bonus. While writing drafts of briefs and doing research projects has been challenging and enjoyable, advocating for clients directly, either with the County Assistance Office, USCIS, or Social Security, has been my favorite part of the job. The coming school year will be far more enjoyable knowing that a legal career filled with meaningful work is a real possibility – if not at CLS, then some other public interest organization in the Philadelphia area.

One of my main tasks this summer at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS) was answering inquiries from aged and disabled immigrants and their families about access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a benefit offered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) to the elderly or disabled with little or no income. Only a small percentage of immigrants qualify for this benefit, and most are only eligible to receive this potentially life-saving cash assistance for seven years from the time they enter the US. If the recipients become citizens, they can continue receiving the benefits indefinitely, just like other eligible US citizens.

Backlogs of permanent residence and naturalization applications mean that many immigrants wait nearly a decade for their paperwork to process, and, in the meantime, lose their SSI benefits. Refugees, asylees, and other humanitarian immigrants are faced with homelessness and destitution here, or returning to the persecution and torture they faced before fleeing to safety in America. CLS won a class action on behalf of these immigrants, *Kaplan v. Chertoff*, requiring that green card and naturalization applicants affected by the seven-year limit receive expedited review. Due to the attention garnered by the lawsuit and the successful legislative efforts of CLS and a broad coalition of advocacy groups, in October 2008 Congress extended SSI benefits by two years for most humanitarian immigrants.

Implementation of the new rules for expediting applications and granting extensions of benefits to qualified immigrants has been uneven. On behalf of CLS I managed a unique hotline that provides advice to immigrants across the country seeking information and advice about their

SSI benefits, their rights under *Kaplan* and the convoluted immigration process generally. Callers can leave us messages in nine different language mailboxes. We retrieve the messages, and depending on which languages are involved, coordinate interpretation services with CLS's bilingual staff and interns, or Language Line, a telephone interpretation service. Serving clients in their own language has proved empowering for the callers, and often corrected administrative misunderstandings. We also prevent the misunderstandings that arise when family and loved ones mistranslate or skip important details in a client's narrative, because they themselves are confused by the complicated language often used on government documents. I compiled some referral resources, beginning with help from the University of Miami Elder Law Clinic, in order to get clients further along their path, rather than just turning them away as ineligible for our specific services.

My job broadened into direct advocacy with local SSA offices, often with fantastic results. The partner of a political asylee from Colombia called in a panic at the beginning of June – the SSA office had sent them a letter stating that his partner's benefits would be terminated in September. Mr. "Alvarez" (a pseudonym) speaks little English, is HIV+, and couldn't afford his medications for even a single month without his SSI. His local SSA worker was sympathetic and even referred Mr. Alvarez to us for help, but felt his hands were tied by his Technical Expert, who did not yet have documentation about the extension. I provided the local SSA worker with the new SSA guidelines and clarified some of the language they assumed was excluding Mr. Alvarez. Now, not only will Mr. Alvarez's benefits continue uninterrupted, the local office can provide accurate information to all of its claimants. I've dealt with similar clients in New York and Maryland: Both received misinformation from their local SSA offices, but I'm hopeful that their cases, and all those like them in their locales, result in better operation and access to benefits for all the subsequent applicants at the newly educated offices.

Thanks again, so much, for making it possible for me to seize this opportunity and do such relevant and meaningful anti-poverty work this summer.

Sincerely,

Tracy Tripp

Drexel University