

August 31, 2016

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I completed my summer internship experience at Bay Area Legal Aid with confidence that youth justice legal aid work is what I aspire to do. My professional goal is to find meaningfulness where I can work with low income communities to address the root causes of poverty. That mission began as a teacher as I believed the classroom was a powerful setting to improve the life outcomes of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and families. I transitioned to legal aid when I learned my impact as a lawyer could better address socioeconomic circumstances outside of the classroom. Thanks to the Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship program, I now know my decision to attend law school was right for me.

I worked under the supervision of two attorneys in the youth justice team. The clients I served helped me broaden my understanding of the intricate child welfare system. With the help of my supervising attorneys, I improve my advocacy skills and provided meaningful legal services to clients when access to lawyers is increasingly difficult to find.

My caseload primarily involved youth legal issues. One project I worked on involved collaborating with probation officers to discover and discharge debt for foster youth clients. I advanced six of these cases by researching issues related to foster youth credit report acquisition. I drafted letters to notify credit reporting and collections agencies of disputed debt. We helped clients file ID fraud police reports. These steps began a long process aimed at eventual debt discharge.

One challenge I learned through this project was that youth clients are often difficult to locate. Many foster youth face continued obstacles to stable housing or have limited access to cell phone use. Two of my youth clients became detained in juvenile hall during the summer. My supervising attorneys introduced me to the idea of "trauma informed care" that provides services from a perspective that contextualizes the client actions as a result of hardship. This perspective helped me better communicate with my clients.

As my caseload became more focused in consumer debt issues for youth clients, I sought more training with the consumer debt practice. Bay Area Legal Aid facilitates a Debtors' Rights Clinic where Bay Area low and middle income residents can seek help to understand and potentially resolve credit issues. I joined the clinic to improve my service to our youth clients. One particular client, a mother of three, arrived to our clinic with paperwork indicating a lawsuit filed against her to collect over \$3,000 of debt from a jewelry purchase five years ago. The purchase was a gold necklace for her boyfriend who at the time had physically abused this client. The relationship involved a repeated cycle of domestic violence incidents. The abuser had poor credit and convinced our client to

open the credit line for the gold necklace. Shortly thereafter, the abuse significantly impacted the livelihood of our client and her children. Our client left for Mexico to escape her abuser. She had recently returned to the United States and worried about threatening letters that warned of a hit to her credit. Our client was stressed about her credit and ability to rent housing or buy school supplies for her children. We reviewed the complaint and learned that the statute of limitations for the debt was four years and had passed. We filed an answer asserting this defense and informed our client of her rights to be free from harassment regarding the debt. The client left our clinic with a strong defense to the \$3,000 debt. She could now continue to seek housing and a secure stable life for her children. Her gratitude and relief was monumental.

The clinic experience supplemented my youth justice work. Throughout the summer, I assisted intakes for five clients at a homeless youth shelter. At the shelter, we screened clients for legal needs and referred clients to social services. One client, an undocumented minor with a child, communicated with me in Spanish to advance a guardianship application and potential foster-care benefits. I visited the client several times and built trust in order to effectively communicate her guardianship needs in the application. Securing a legal guardian for this client was important to sign education and health forms for the youth mother and her young child.

In another case, I helped prepare a Supplemental Security Income hearing for an incarcerated client with diagnosed mental health needs. The client presented to the hearing by telephone. Following the hearing, I drove to the state prison and met with the client. We reviewed the hearing outcome, which resulted in a continuance, and prepared paperwork to update the medical records for the next hearing. My supervisor helped me prepare the questions for this meeting. Some of my questions asked about the client's state of being in the prison. My conversation with the client illustrated the importance of securing public benefits upon the client's release date, which was a few months away. Without the disability benefits, our client would face serious obstacles to housing, food, and basic necessities.

My summer internship is crucial for my transition towards a career in public interest legal work. The internship was, however, more important to the clients I served. The stories and challenges of these clients demonstrate the high demand of legal services regarding our impoverished California children. Equal Justice America addresses that demand through its law student fellowships. I am proud of my summer work and proud to have represented the EJA by serving the civil legal needs of poor clients. I will continue to represent the EJA vision in my service as an aspiring public interest lawyer.

Sincerely,

Curtis Davis  
University of San Diego School of Law  
Juris Doctor Expected May 2018