

August 13, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My experience at the Family Defense Center can be summarized in one word: incredible. I thoroughly enjoyed working with the Family Defense Center's talented attorneys and remarkable clients. Together, we pursued justice for parents in Illinois.

The Family Defense Center represents families in the Illinois child welfare system. The Center focuses most of its resources on representing parents accused of child abuse or neglect. Parents generally call the Center's intake line during or after an Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) investigation. When parents call during a DCFS investigation, the Family Defense Center can offer advice or representation. When parents call after DCFS has "indicated" them for child abuse or neglect, the Family Defense Center can offer assistance with the appeals process.

Supervised by Family Defense Center attorneys, I worked to protect the rights of families in the child welfare system. During the summer, I drafted a brief in support of a complaint for administrative review, a motion to proceed under pseudonyms, portions of retainer agreements, and client correspondence. I also participated in meetings with staff attorneys and conducted intake. I interviewed many clients during my time at the Family Defense Center, and their stories never ceased to surprise me. I worked closely with one client in particular during her DCFS investigation.

A mother and childcare provider called the Family Defense Center's intake line seeking legal representation during her DCFS investigation, which was opened because her child had acted inappropriately at school. To support her family, this mother operated a daycare center, but as a result of the investigation, the Department put restrictions on her daycare license, thus limiting her ability to conduct her business. The Family Defense Center represented this mother during her investigation. As a result of the Center's advocacy, this mother received the heightened due process owed to her as a childcare provider, and her investigation was eventually "unfounded."

During this investigation, I drafted letters addressed to professionals at the Department of Children and Family Services advocating on this mother's behalf. The attorney supervising my work provided helpful feedback on these letters, and this feedback sharpened my legal writing skills. More importantly, when the client informed me that her investigation had been "unfounded," I knew I had positively impacted a mother's life. As a result of my work and the work of my supervising attorney, this woman could continue to raise her children and operate her business without interference.

Other clients were grateful that another individual recognized the challenges they faced as parents coping with the difficulties of the child welfare system. I recall one client specifically thanking me for listening to her story. This conversation serves as a personal reminder that above all, people crave to be heard. As a future attorney, it is my duty to listen.

In sum, my experience at the Family Defense Center surpassed my highest expectations. I am humbled by my experiences working for this organization.

Sincerely,

Allison Wagner
University of Illinois College of Law
Class of 2014