

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

August 23, 2012

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My summer fellowship with Equal Justice America was spent at an incredible legal advocacy organization located in Chicago, The Family Defense Center (FDC). I was drawn to the FDC by their mission: "advocating justice for families involved in the child welfare system." As a former foster care youth with parents heavily involved in the mental health, criminal justice, and child welfare systems, I have a unique perspective of the plethora of issues families face. My personal experiences have fueled my passion to help parents get the services they need in order to keep their family together. My parent advocacy passion matched perfectly with the work at the FDC.

The majority of my work at the FDC has been to conduct intakes with prospective clients. Over the course of three months, I've spoken to dozens of parents and grandparents who had cases with the IL Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) and the juvenile court system. Our assistance with each client ranged from referrals to advice to direct legal assistance with juvenile court, administrative hearings, or federal class actions. The cases included all levels of government, from administrative law judges to an appeal filed with the Illinois Supreme Court. Additionally, I researched topics in child and family law, civil procedure, evidence, and constitutional law.

For one interesting case, I assisted in drafting the argument section of a Memorandum of Law in Support of Complaint for Administrative Review. The case involved a mother and her teenage son. The son, who suffers from a myriad of mental disorders and has a history of violence, began attacking his mother. In the process of the attack, the son suffered a neck injury from a shard of a broken vase. Despite the mother's claim of self-defense, she was indicated for child abuse. The FDC is currently in the process of appealing that decision.

The above case was the first of many that involved the difficulties parents face when raising a child with mental health problems. I quickly discovered that more often than not, parents raising children with several mental diagnoses are charged with abuse or neglect (such as the case discussed above) or lose their custodial rights to the state because the parents cannot find necessary services to help their child. Families are consistently torn apart because of the

state's inability to help these parents, at no fault of their own. It is truly heartbreaking. When I had imagined the profiles of families involved in the child welfare system, I had never imagined cases like these.

Many of the cases that I have encountered this summer do not involve parents who are "evil" and severely abuse their children. Most of the time, these are parents struggling to survive, struggling with mental health or substance abuse problems, or struggling to learn the "correct" way to parent their child. They love their children and want to know how to protect their family. However, we want to protect the child and if a parent cannot take care of them for just one moment, things could go horribly wrong. How do you decide when a parent can actually no longer parent? How do you decide when to place a child in foster care, a system that often traumatizes the child just as much as a neglectful home? The field of child welfare law has no easy answers, which is why I will continue to work in this area and advocate justice for the rights of families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amanda M. Walsh', written in a cursive style.

Amanda M. Walsh
Loyola University Chicago
J.D./M.S.W. Candidate 2015