

ANTHONY ORTEGA

509 W. 155th St, Apt 4B, New York, NY 10032 • (915) 240-8844 • Anthony.Ortega@law.columbia.edu

August 30, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am a second-year student at Columbia Law School, writing to you about my experience as an Equal Justice America Fellow at the Legal Aid Society in New York City. With the support of your organization, I worked with the largest legal services provider in the country that serves an even larger low-income and needy population across all five boroughs. I had the privilege of working with LAS's Health Law Unit, a group of four dedicated attorneys and two paralegals serving the entire New York City area for all their health-related legal needs.

My fellowship in the Health Law Unit was an eye-opening experience. I originally applied to this unit because I have a background in healthcare – I have a degree in Human Biology, my academic work focused on health policy and social health disparities across different populations, and I have four years of experience working as a consultant to hospitals. I thought that my experience with Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurers and their precarious relationship with medical providers would translate quite easily into a new setting working on behalf of patients, instead of hospitals. I was pleasantly surprised at this not being the case at all.

My work consisted of providing legal assistance to low-income clients in Medicaid and Medicare budgeting and denial cases. The variety of work I saw was astounding – I helped patients navigate the circuitous enrollment process to help them qualify for Medicaid. I researched and wrote affirmations to submit to administrative law judges detailing the medical needs of patients whose services had been unfairly or illegally reduced. I advised clients on enrolling in cost-saving programs whose benefits, though a godsend for our poorest clients, are difficult to access or even learn about. I also negotiated on behalf of clients with providers and debt collectors who were unwilling to provide financial assistance to patients unable to pay for services they desperately needed. Finally, I spent a significant amount of time researching New York State's Medicaid reform waiver program and drafted memoranda on how this gargantuan privatization and reform effort could affect our client populations – both in positive ways and negative ones.

In all this work, my familiarity with the healthcare and public insurance industry helped me quickly visualize issues so that I could jump in headfirst to tackle these legal and administrative problems. However, the vast majority of the substantive knowledge one needs to operate in such a labyrinthine regulatory scheme I learned on the job with the help of four wonderful lawyers and two extremely knowledgeable paralegals. In such a large organization, the amount of knowledge possessed a small team of six was truly impressive. Equally so, the thousands of people helped by an elite team – both through individual cases and impact litigation – is a testament to their dedication to their health practice. I could not have met expectations without the invaluable training and guidance they all provided me.

Mr. Ruben, I thank you for your organization's support. The fellowship confirmed what I had gambled when I first came to law school – that I want to dedicate myself to health law in some capacity. Such a rapidly-changing field risks leaving too many behind, and these people are unfortunately everywhere we

turn. I hope to establish a career where I can continue helping those for whom the stakes are highest – the needy, the unhealthy, the unable. My time with the Legal Aid Society’s Health Law Unit showed me that there are indeed attorneys who can thrive and make an impact helping these at-risk populations. As a result, I am currently working with a professor to establish a Health Rights Clinic at my law school. I can’t wait to continue this work very soon.

Sincerely,

Anthony Ortega
Columbia Law School
Class of 2014