

July 22, 2016

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I want to express my sincere appreciation to you and Equal Justice America for opening the door to such a meaningful internship experience this summer at Greater Boston Legal Services. Your organization's support ensured that I was able to pursue public interest work in my field of interest – employment law – and exposed me to public interest attorneys who have in turn showed me how much good work can be done through this sort of public interest legal services in a sustainable and effective way.

I can best illustrate how I experienced this growth – and how it has solidified my commitment to work in public interest law after I graduate – in describing a few of the clients I worked with during my summer at GBLS. I have changed names and some details in these stories to protect the clients' privacy. I first talked to John after he had received notice that his unemployment training benefits had been cut off by the state. He had gone back to school after a protracted period of unemployment in the hopes of adding professional skills which would lead to meaningful employment after he received his degree. He had previously attended school but left because he lacked the financial means to continue – and this state training program had, it seemed, been an opportunity to finally complete his degree and get back on his feet. However, despite following the state guidelines and seemingly being an ideal program for the spirit of the training program – John had been disqualified because one of his school's administrators had written on a form that his program would take 2 years and 4 days to complete, which is 4 days too long according to the state guidelines! It was eye-opening to see someone get caught in the gears of bureaucracy in this way. Since no one at the state agency had picked up a phone to call the school to determine if this timeline was indeed correct, John had been cut off from benefits for months and was worried that he would be unable to pay rent. I worked with John closely, as well as with his school administrators, to show that that date was in error and that, in fact, he would be finished in time but despite this documented information, the state still insisted on a hearing to determine the exact date of completion. In the end, John prevailed – but it had come at a cost – the added months of financial strain, the continuous conversations with us and with the state. This occurred all because the program was so rigidly designed that it would rather cut someone off from benefits designed to get that person back into the workforce because, on paper, their program was 4 days too long, instead of working with the client to ensure that the information they had received was correct before cutting him off. It was also a clear reminder of how important having access to legal services attorneys is – I am sure that for every John that comes into GBLS, there are many people who receive such arbitrary termination of benefits that they are entitled to and who do not feel they can fight back.

In another meaningful case, Derrick had once held a middle class union job working in Boston and supporting a family. Over time, the trauma he had experienced in the military along with addictions he

picked up decimated this stable life, leading to his termination from work, the disintegration of his family, the loss of his house to foreclosure and leaving him with disabilities that make it impossible for him to work. When he came to our office, he was living off of \$300 a month in state assistance, living on the basement floor of a relative and he was hounded by creditors and tax authorities for money he did not have and would not have in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, his son had graduated from Morehouse and he had not been able to travel to watch the ceremony. Working with Derrick, we started chipping away at the multifaceted barriers that he faced. We worked with him to find mental health treatment, we put together a tax offer to his creditors to remove the financial barrier and harassment he was facing and we worked with the GBLS housing unit to help him find more stable housing. As I sat with him in the Social Security office, trying to clear up their computer system that had marked him as a victim of ID theft since he had been unstably housed for so long, we talked not about of the plethora of problems that he faced – but about opportunities in the future, all that stem from the possibility of getting out from under the weight of these various barriers. It was a reminder for me of how important it is as a young lawyer to see clients like Derrick as the complex and insightful people that they are and not just as embodiments of a series of legal problems that are akin to the hypotheticals posed to us law students in the classroom. I want to be the kind of public interest lawyer that always remembers that the legal system is just one avenue for working to fix the ways that people are bound and broken in our society. At times, it is important to work on personal empowerment, on access to health care, on familial relationships and especially on forming bonds with clients that go beyond a discrete problem that can be fixed, but does not lead to fundamental change for that client. It is important to see the whole person – and the holistic needs, some of which that can be addressed by the legal system, but also those that cannot be.

It is through these cases and others that I feel incredibly lucky to have been able to work at Greater Boston Legal Services this summer with the support of EJA. It will make me a more sensitive and thoughtful lawyer and it showed me a path of being able to take my background in community organizing and combining it with the legal skills I pick up in the classroom. The staff at GBLS all carry compassion for their clients – and I have benefited greatly from watching them in action and being able to absorb, as best I could, lessons from their work and to contribute in my own small way.

Thank you again for your support,

Sincerely,

Jamie van Wagtendonk

Boston University School of Law, Class of 2018