

August 31, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

The generous support of Equal Justice America provided me the opportunity to complete an internship at Equip for Equality (“EFE”) in the Special Education Clinic during the summer of 2014. EFE is the federal protection and advocacy organization for the state of Illinois for individuals with disabilities. The Clinic works to ensure that all students in Illinois have access to a free appropriate public education, regardless of their (dis)abilities, and focuses on providing families with educational resources, self advocacy assistance, and, when necessary, legal assistance or representation.

As an intern in the Special Education Clinic, I had the opportunity to become involved with a variety of aspects of special education law. Most significantly, I provided assistance to individuals that called into the Helpline. For each client I would complete intake, assess the case with my supervising attorney, and then provide follow up assistance regarding the legal issue. At any given time I was working with six to eight clients. While all issues I handled related to special education, each specific case was different. Topics ranged from disciplinary issues, to access to a least restrictive classroom environment, or placement for a student in an alternate therapeutic day school.

The intake for each Helpline caller consisted of a set of demographic questions about both the caller and the student, followed by issue specific questions. Following this conversation, I would bring each client’s case to my supervising attorney and we would assess the merits of the legal claim. Every client received assistance in some form, whether through educational resources or a description of their legal options. In a few cases my supervising attorney and I decided to request additional educational records about the student from either the parent or the school. In doing this, we would often request IEPs, school records, evaluations, and other relevant documents. These assisted us in determining next steps for providing assistance.

I began assisting with one particular case at the records review phase. Jane Doe had been attending a therapeutic day school in the suburbs for the previous ten years. She was seeking to obtain appropriate transition services in her home district until the age of 22. At the time that I began assisting, EFE had already agreed to assist the client through representation. I was tasked with sorting through educational documents received from the school district. This task alone taught me an immense amount about document review and how to distinguish which documents are relevant in preparing for potential mediation or litigation sessions. During this phase of working with the client, EFE corresponded with the district to ensure that all documents necessary to evaluate the case were received.

As all of this was occurring during the summer and the new school year was quickly approaching, Jane Doe and her mother were most concerned with finding an immediate placement for Jane for both summer school and in the upcoming fall. Prior to any negotiations, EFE provided the client's family assistance in obtaining information about possible transition services and arranged visits at various programs for Jane and her mother to see her options. EFE then assisted Jane by attending a mediation session with the client and the district representatives. During this mediation session the parties agreed on an immediate placement for the duration of the summer school program and Jane was enrolled within a week. While other components of the case remained unresolved pending negotiations, it was rewarding to see how happy Jane was in the successful immediate placement.

This experience, among the many other client interactions I had at EFE, confirmed my commitment to working in the public interest sector. While important, the experience of learning law in an academic setting does not focus on the impact the law can have on clients. During this summer I also had the opportunity to research special education issues for briefs for attorneys at EFE, and all I had learned in law school was extremely valuable in completing that work. That being said, the opportunity to see the impact of the attorneys' work at EFE on the clients was incredible. A public interest attorney can make a direct impact on their clients' lives, and I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity at EFE this summer.

Sincerely,

Catrina Miksis  
University of Illinois, College of Law  
Juris Doctor Candidate, Class of 2016