

August 31, 2011

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for the honor of receiving an Equal Justice America Fellowship this past summer for my full-time internship at the Legal Aid Society in New York City. With the support of the EJA fellowship, I was able to intern at the Prisoners' Rights Project ("PRP"), a division within the civil section of the Legal Aid Society, which advocates on behalf of individuals detained in New York City jails and incarcerated in New York State prisons.

My desire to work at PRP stemmed from my interest in the human rights of prisoners. I believe that people do not lose all their rights, including their right to be treated with dignity—a universal human right—merely because they are prisoners. The government, including all the city and state agencies within New York, is obligated to ensure that the human rights of people in its custody are ensured and protected.

At PRP, I quickly became oriented to the numerous battles that PRP fights on a daily basis with city and state officials to restore dignity to and protect the basic rights of prisoners. I learned about efforts to protect individuals from excessive use of force, to unshackle women who gave birth behind bars, and to obtain medical and mental health services for prisoners in oppressive conditions of 23-hour solitary confinement.

My work during the summer was centered on advocacy for seriously mentally ill prisoners throughout New York State. Through the pioneering efforts of PRP and a broader alliance of mental health advocates, standards for mentally ill prisoners have greatly improved in the last decade. I helped monitor the implementation of these standards through my correspondence with prisoners, and I advocated on prisoners' behalf when we determined that the agencies responsible for their treatment were failing in their duties. The prisoners' letters left an indelible mark on me as I learned of their degrading conditions of confinement.

With EJA's support, I gained much-needed perspective about how the human rights of such a vulnerable population as prisoners can be improved at the local level. At the same time, I came away from my experience realizing the great expanse between well-established human rights principles and the practices of New York State agencies.

I am extremely grateful for having had this opportunity as I finish my final year of law school and look for ways to contribute to the implementation of human rights standards at a local level. Thank you again for all of your support.

Sincerely,

Elena Landriscina
American University Washington College of Law
J.D. Candidate 2012



Civil Practice
Prisoners' Rights Project
199 Water Street
New York, NY 10038
T (212) 577-3530
www.legal-aid.org

Blaine (Fin) V. Fogg
President

Steven Banks
Attorney-in-Chief

Adriene L. Holder
Attorney-in-Charge
Civil Practice

John Boston
Project Director
Prisoners' Rights Project

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RE: Equal Justice America Fellow – Elena Landriscina

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I had the pleasure of working with Ms. Elena Landriscina this summer when she was an Equal Justice America Fellow working as a summer intern at the Prisoners' Rights Project (PRP). Ms. Landriscina is diligent, productive and possesses excellent communication skills, writing and analytic abilities. She will be a wonderful attorney and committed advocate.

At PRP, Ms. Landriscina assisted me with our work advocating for prisoners with mental illness.

Client Contact & Administrative Advocacy: Elena corresponded with prisoners with mental illness answering their legal questions and advocating on their behalf with the two State agencies (Department of Corrections and Community Services and Office of Mental Health) as needed. This work included reading and issue spotting in prisoner communications, legal research and drafting responses that met the understanding level of our clients. Elena responded to prisoner phone calls and on occasion advocated via phone with agency personnel. Elena participated in our meeting with the New York State Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (CQCAPD), the state agency charged with monitoring mental health treatment in the state prisons pursuant to the SHU Exclusion Law.

Writing: Elena drafted a memo for prisoners with mental illness on the new SHU Exclusion Law passed in New York. This required review of new sections of the Correction Law and the Mental Hygiene Law and comparison of the new statutes with the settlement in our litigation, *Disability Advocates, Inc. v. New York State Office of Mental Health (DAI v. OMH)*. The SHU Exclusion Law adopted many of the provisions of the settlement, making them permanent.

Litigation Support: Elena reviewed and analyzed prison disciplinary hearing tapes received as part of the settlement in *DAI v. OMH*. She reviewed the tapes of the disciplinary hearing and the confidential testimony provided by Office of Mental Health staff when mental health was “at issue” in the hearing. Her analysis included making judgments on failures by hearing officers to adequately consider mental illness and failures of OMH staff to adequately describe the effects of diagnoses and medications. This task required investigation and review of documents received through the settlement.

Elena Landriscina was a pleasure to work with, careful, considerate and able to request clarification when needed. She worked well alone and as a member of a team. She demonstrated critical intelligence and motivation in her work. I hope that her experience with PRP was useful to her understanding of the practice of law as well as of the rights of prisoners.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me: 212-577-7977.

Sincerely,

Sarah Kerr
Staff Attorney