

August 23, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My Summer Fellowship was with the Chicago Legal Clinic at their Austin Law Circle Office. The Austin Office handles the Clinic's family law clients as well as the Ex-Offender Advocacy Program (EAP). The majority of my work was centered on general practice clients who came to us with issues relating to divorce, custody, child support, and parentage.

Every week, I would receive a list of applicants who called the main office asking for help with a particular family law issue. I would call each applicant and ask questions to further assess their legal problems. After these phone calls, which could last anywhere from ten to forty minutes depending on the complexity of the applicant's potential case, I would meet with one of the attorneys to give him a brief summary of the case and the two of us would decide whether or not the applicant would be accepted as a client. This initial assessment process was really interesting because it highlighted the importance of screening clients based on need, legal issues, and perceived level of cooperation – an important, not-so-obvious factor that sets the tone for the rest of the attorney-client relationship.

While assessment calls were an important part of my duties, they weren't the majority of responsibility. I spent most of my time accompanying my boss to court (my assistance was limited as I wasn't a 711, but the experience was incredibly informative and interesting) and drafting motions and petitions. I was involved with drafting documents used in all stages of a divorce proceeding, from petitions for dissolution of marriage to joint parenting agreements. Just being able to access and read previous petitions was such a great learning experience because I was exposed to the language of the documents, and got a handle on typical outlines and forms.

My boss handled the Clinic's domestic violence clients, which meant that I got to work a lot with DV clients as well. After getting the assignment, I would call the client right away and have to quickly assess the situation to see if he or she was in immediate danger. If so, I would go through the steps on how to obtain an emergency order of protection. If the client already had an order of protection in place, I would have to go through the most recent instances of abuse or violence with the client in order to get information for an amended order of protection, which was usually needed if the client got the emergency order pro se and it was lacking detail. These were always difficult situations and required delicate handling, but it was necessary in order to best help the client. Some of my favorite and most memorable clients were DV clients because, personally, I really enjoyed being able to help someone who clearly needed assistance and I worked well with the tight deadlines of the domestic violence division.

Although our office focused on family law clients, I also got the opportunity to work with some clients dealing with criminal law issues. Two afternoons a week, our office would go to the Cook County Criminal Courthouse and represent clients pro bono. The clients were people who had filed for expungement or sealing of their criminal records about six months before but the State's Attorney had made an objection, usually on statutory grounds such as nature or number of offenses, to their petition and now there was a hearing before a judge to decide the matter. I would talk to clients and look at their rap sheets and criminal records to try to figure out what the objection to the petition was. I would then prep the client on what questions to anticipate from the judge and what to highlight about his or her life that would have the best chance of convincing the judge to grant the plea for expungement or sealing. I would also chart the outcome of each case and the Clinic uses the data to get funding each year for the program. We would see about fifty clients, twice a week and I can only remember two times throughout the entire summer that one of the petitions was denied and the judge didn't overrule the State's objection.

The other prong of the EAP was working with clients who were petitioning the governor for an executive pardon. All summer, I worked with two clients and prepared their clemency applications. The preparation consisted of about three hour long, one-on-one meetings with each client where I would get details on his family history, criminal history, and current life situation. Meeting with my clients and writing their petitions was one of the unexpected highlights of my summer. Coming into my internship, I was focused on the family law aspect, because that's what I hope to practice in the future. However, meeting with my two clemency clients and really getting to know them – beyond their rap sheets and beyond their arrest histories – was an immensely satisfying and eye-opening experience. I heard the men's stories and realized they were both incredibly complex people with unique stories and experiences that shaped them into the people sitting in front of me; people whose lives had been shaped by extremities I couldn't even begin to fathom; people who had weathered difficult times again and again; people who had each summoned the strength to turn their lives around and were seeking help to finalize the process. In writing the petitions, I really got to know my clients and I'm looking forward to accompanying them to their hearings before the Prisoner Review Board in October.

My Summer Fellowship exceeded all of my expectations and was one of the best experiences I've ever had. I'm looking forward to continue working at my placement during the fall semester and, hopefully, working in a closely related field post-graduation. I'm so grateful to EJA for making this amazing opportunity financially feasible and I hope that the organization is able to continue helping students find informative, interesting, and, most importantly, rewarding internships for years to come.

Sincerely,

Ellen Porter
Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Class of 2014