

August 31, 2012

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

Re: Equal Justice America Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you very much for your generous support of my summer experience providing legal services to farmworkers at California Rural Legal Assistance in Salinas, California. I had a very educational and fulfilling summer, and I plan to continue in this area of public interest law in the future.

My main project for the summer was to help set up a long-term program to address drinking water contamination in low-income farmworker communities in the Salinas Valley of California. In this region, groundwater is the primary source of drinking water, yet it is increasingly contaminated by the runoff of fertilizers and pesticides from the surrounding agricultural fields. To initiate this program, I researched the legal framework for drinking water standards, made connections with farmworker communities with known drinking water contamination, helped communities access funding opportunities for immediate relief, compiled existing data and reports about disadvantaged communities with drinking water contamination, created culturally appropriate outreach materials, and participated in a statewide advisory group about drinking water contamination. This program is continuing through my supervisor and a new full-time community worker who was hired at the end of the summer in my office to work exclusively on drinking water contamination.

In addition to this water contamination project, I also assisted attorneys in my office with ongoing employment, housing, education, unemployment, language access, and health and safety cases. For example, I represented four farmworker clients in an administrative hearing for unpaid wages, did research on the educational rights of students who are expelled that contributed to the school retracting the expulsion, helped with intake on employment and benefits claims, and assisted with a minors compromise hearing.

One highlight of my summer experience was working with a client who hadn't been paid for several months of work as a farmworker. Her boss had promised to pay her and her four coworkers, but never did. Our office helped the four farmworkers navigate the administrative process to attempt to recover thousands of dollars of unpaid wages. I represented the four clients at the final stage of this process: an administrative hearing in front of a labor commissioner. I learned the facts and legal

issues in the case and met with the clients before the hearing to ask questions and prepare them for what would happen. Since the administrative hearing was like a mini-trial but not as formal, it was the perfect setting to try out my advocacy skills. The decision is still pending, but we are very hopeful that it will be in our favor.

In addition to the wage claim, this same client's drinking water was contaminated above safe drinking water levels so she had to purchase bottled water at a high cost. Unfortunately there was no quick legal remedy for her in this situation. However, the research that I did for the new drinking water contamination program was used in an amicus brief that my office filed on behalf of this client and a community based organizations in a lawsuit aimed at reducing the sources of water pollution.

Working on these two different issues on behalf of the same client illuminated the wide array of challenges that one farmworker can face. After my summer experience with CRLA, I am now more motivated than ever to work to identify and address these various challenges comprehensively.

Sincerely,

Erin Gaines
University of Texas School of Law
J.D. Candidate, 2013