

October 24, 2015

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II, Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112
(804) 744-4200

Re: Equal Justice America Fellowship Letter

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My Summer Fellowship experience at the Legal Aid Society's Prisoners' Rights Project engaged me in some of the most fulfilling and needed legal work in New York City. I answered phone calls from incarcerated individuals and conducted weekly client interviews at New York City jails. I advocated for clients through administrative channels and sought health and mental health care as well as reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. I also filed reports with the Investigation Division related to correctional misconduct and helped incarcerated individuals file Notices of Claims with the Comptroller's Office.

The Department of Correction incarcerates nearly 16,000 individuals in City jails. On Rikers Island, which contains 9 active City jails, approximately 40% of those incarcerated suffer from mental illness. Further, in 2014, the Department of Justice found a deep-seated "culture of violence" on Rikers Island. The health and safety concerns of incarcerated persons are some of the most acute in New York City. Those incarcerated in City jails are also some of the poorest clients served by the Legal Aid Society. My internship used legal channels to remedy many of these outstanding problems.

As an example, I learned from one client's lawyer that an incarcerated individual had been attacked in one of the City jails. After making several inquiries to the facility, I learned that the client had suffered head trauma, experienced seizures, and was vomiting. I immediately contacted Correctional Health Services, and was able to have the client moved from punitive segregation to a City hospital for medical care.

Soon after the incident, I interviewed the client to learn about what happened. I found out that a correctional officer had perpetrated the attack. I took the client's statement, obtained his medical records. I also helped the client complete a Notice of Claim to file with the City Comptroller in order to preserve his right to file a lawsuit at a later date. I then produced a report for the Department of Correction's Investigation Division to review.

I continued to follow up with the client. If a medical or mental health issue arose, I would advocate on the client's behalf. I also continued to advocate for the client's safety in correctional institutions. The client thanked me directly for saving his life.

By establishing trust with the client as a legal advocate, and restoring humanity to a vulnerable and neglected population, I felt I made a substantial contribution of my legal skills to those most in need of legal assistance. I want to express my deepest appreciation to Equal Justice America for affording me the opportunity to engage in such work. It was, and will be, formative in my development as a future lawyer.

Sincerely,

Michael D'Ambrosio
J.D. Candidate, 2016
Fordham Law School