

GABRIELLE WINSLOW
LAF (Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago)

August 5, 2016

Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am a rising second-year student at Harvard Law School. This summer, I worked at LAF (formerly the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago) in their public benefits practice group. Although I knew I wanted to work with people living in poverty based on my previous experiences with Teach for America, I knew little about public benefits beyond the challenged national image of the Social Security Administration and those who relied on its benefits to survive.

Sadly, dealing directly with the SSA bureaucracy and red-tape often reinforced troubled notions about how well it was functioning. Phone calls to local offices were routinely ignored, finding contact information was often an elusive goal, and several times success was only achieved when a higher power, be it an SSA area director or a federal judge, overturned or sought a different decision. However, these challenges were mitigated by the greater empathy and compassion I have gained for people working their way through the unbelievably challenging mire that obtaining SSI or SSDI can be.

One of the most striking cases was a disability denial for a man with a brain tumor that, when removed, had reached the size of a tennis ball. Previously an engineer with an MBA and a six-figure salary, he began to behave erratically and violently, became essentially homeless, and lost his memory of years of his life while blacked out before the tumor was discovered. The Administrative Law Judge insisted that the onset date of the disability was the date the tumor was discovered and surgically removed. A federal judge struck that decision down on appeal, asserting that even Athena needed a gestational period before leaping fully-formed from Zeus. I performed records reviews, drafted a hearing statement, and attended the client's second hearing before the same ALJ. A decision has not yet been made in this case, but I am cautiously optimistic after hearing the opinion of the medical expert at the hearing. Although the client is not deserving of more sympathy than other clients who have been more impoverished or received fewer advantages in life, his case reinforced to me how the randomness with which tragedy can strike and the chaos of the SSA work together to leave every American vulnerable.

In another case, a minor's social security was denied because the SSA had erroneously listed a substantial income against her SSA budget. This child was only nine. I called a local office for weeks, leaving unsuccessful voicemails pleading for a callback or talking to anyone who would pick up only to be told they couldn't help me. We reached out the area director, who eventually reprimanded the local office and we were able to set up a meeting to rectify the problem. This

case ultimately had what seems like a simple solution, but it still took weeks of repeated phone calls from legal representation, contact information which isn't generally given to the general public, and a meeting to get rid of that nonsensical number and restore that child's benefits. There was no way her single mother, struggling to get out of poverty and support her children, would have had the time and resources to get this done without legal representation. She brought her daughter to the meeting, who happily rewarded everyone there with a hug, but which also speaks to the difficulties dealing with broken bureaucracy can pose to people who already face so many additional struggles from poverty, systematic racism, or illness.

I greatly enjoyed my time working with LAF. Although I was feeling slightly burnt out after my experiences working with people in poverty during Teach for America prior to law school, this summer once more empowered and energized me. It was a wonderful experience to see my newly-forming legal skills contribute to active and direct change in our client's daily lives. It was an honor to be able to work here and see an organization deeply committed to radical justice.

Sincerely,
Gabrielle Winslow
Harvard Law School, Class of 2018

Dan Ruben
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road, Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112
Sent Via email to: Katie@equaljusticeamerica.org

Re: Summer Legal Services Fellowship – Gabrielle Winslow

Dear Mr. Ruben,

LAF is the Legal Services Corporation-funded legal aid provider for Cook County, Illinois which covers the City of Chicago and metropolitan suburbs. Gabrielle worked in our Public Benefits Practice Group which represents people with public benefits including Social Security Disability Insurance (“SSDI”), Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”), Medicaid, Food Stamps, and TANF cash assistance. We primarily represent individuals at administrative hearings and on appellate review of those decisions.

Gabrielle assisted with a range of matters, including drafting a reply brief for administrative review of a termination of SSDI benefits in federal court. She reviewed our brief in support of our complaint, the government’s response, and the several hundred pages of medical and related evidence that comprised the administrative record. She was able to understand the issues in the case, find caselaw which supported our arguments, and draft a clear response to the arguments raised by the government in its brief. Her work product required only routine editing and revisions before filing. Gabrielle also provided helpful caselaw research for another federal court appeal involving the standards for establishing an intellectual disability; her quick and thorough memo included results from the capital criminal context, as well as the social security context, which I found creative and thoughtful. Gabrielle also reviewed and summarized medical records for several cases and drafted a hearing brief for the administrative fact-finding hearing on an SSDI claim. Finally, she had the opportunity to attend two Social Security administrative hearings to put this learning into real-world context. Gabrielle also had an opportunity to interview clients whom we represented regarding their financial eligibility for SSI benefits, apply the complicated household finances to dense regulations, and draft affidavits in support of the case. She was persistent and thorough in her understanding of the rather messy real-world facts and convoluted program rules.

It was a pleasure to work with Gabrielle. She came prepared, followed through with deadlines, and let me know when she needed more work to do. I hope and trust that she found the experience as rewarding for her as it was helpful for our team. If you have any questions or need further information, please feel free to contact me.

Best regards,
Amy Marinacci
Supervisory Attorney
312.347.8395
amarinacci@lafchicago.org