

September 17, 2014

Dan Ruben
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II, Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you for your assistance in making it possible for me to intern at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS) this summer. My experience at CLS confirmed my commitment to public interest work and dedication to providing civil legal services to low-income populations.

As an intern in CLS's Aging and Disabilities Unit, I had the opportunity to work on a variety of cases. Much of my summer focused on assisting individuals appeal adverse Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) disability determinations. I collected evidence of clients' disabilities, navigated bureaucracies, and prepared clients for hearings. I also represented a client in his appeal for SSI disability benefits.

My experiences this summer provided me with a greater understanding of the compounded challenges facing indigent individuals with disabilities. SSI benefits help individuals meet their basic needs and can often mean the difference between shelter and homelessness. Ironically, those who need benefits the most may be unable to advocate for themselves due to their disabilities. For example, this summer I worked with a client who had severe schizophrenia. He sought legal assistance for his SSI case when he was on medication. However, while his appeal was pending, his mental health substantially declined. At the time of his hearing, the client was off his medication and involuntarily hospitalized. At CLS, I had the opportunity to help with his case. I collected evidence, submitted a brief, and advocated for the client at his hearing. Legal representation was crucial for this client. Although he had a strong case for receiving SSI benefits, he would have been unable to advocate for himself at his disability hearing due to his disability.

In another case, I had the opportunity to help an indigent family struggling to make ends meet. While the family received food stamps, their benefits were calculated as if the mother was working—despite the fact that the mother was disabled and unable to work. The amount of food stamps was not enough; frequently, benefits ran out in the middle of the month. This meant that the mother had to turn to friends and family to help feed her children. I contacted the governmental agency on her behalf, and it became clear that a clerical error caused a miscalculation in the family's benefits. The family was entitled to almost double the amount that they were receiving. By navigating bureaucracies, I was able to assist the family in obtaining the amount of benefits that they were entitled to so that they could meet their basic needs.

My internship at CLS, and the opportunity to learn from experts in the field of poverty law, was an invaluable experience. I am grateful to Equal Justice America for making this possible and for assisting students who hope to advocate for low-income populations.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Jessica Berger
Georgetown University Law Center
Class of 2015