

JESSICA J. WIKSTROM

August 24, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I went to law school after spending three frustrating years in an inner city public school classroom in Dallas, Texas. During those years I watched some of my students leave for juvenile detention centers, read heartbreaking essays about their dangerous crossings into this country and the families they left behind, and struggled to provide the special education services that hundreds of my students were guaranteed by federal law but were simply not a priority for the school. As my kids struggled to stay afloat in the sea of systems and laws that constantly threatened to sink them, I tried to seek the legal help that I believed was the key to finding them a safe harbor where they could focus on growing up, learning, and reaching their potential instead of managing systems and laws I wasn't even able to navigate as a college-educated adult. The problem was that no such legal services existed for children in low-income households in our community. My students were left to swim against the current on their own. Ultimately, many could not make it out.

Every day working for the Children's Law Center of Massachusetts was an opportunity to refight—and win—the battles that I was not able to help my students with when I was in the classroom. While the kids were obviously not the same, the issues that confront CLCM's clients are. From schools resistant to providing kids the special education services they desperately need and are entitled to, to young immigrants looking for safety from the gang-violence of their home countries in our neighborhoods, the stories and legal needs are the same as those of my students in Dallas. The difference is that kids and their advocates in Massachusetts are not left alone in their struggles like my students and I were in Dallas. Instead, CLCM provides a unique and critical service to this often forgotten population by giving direction and hope even when it cannot provide legal representation.

One of the major ways that CLCM is able to do this is through their intake line, which is open to anyone with legal questions affecting juveniles. Unlike some intake lines that are used to simply screen out cases that cannot be taken, CLCM utilizes its intake line as a help line that can provide callers with referrals and a variety of printed resources that CLCM has created to help inform the public about pertinent laws, rights, administrative systems, etc. As a law student intern I got to help with the intake line, and thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to speak with

almost 100 different people from across the state about their unique education, custody, and other matters before gathering resources for them or opening an investigation to see if CLCM could take their case.

As a law student, the experience served as chance to practice critical lawyering skills. For example, when people called the intake line they always had a story, not a legal issue. It was my job to ask the right questions to organize the story (which was sometimes developed through an hour-long conversation), sort through potential issues that we could advise on, and do it in a way that respected the human aspects of their situation. Some callers were respectful, some were pushy, some were sad, some were angry, and some were just really mean. However, I needed to find a way to effectively speak with each and every one of them in order to complete the intake and provide them with helpful resources. I also enjoyed the follow-up from these calls, which often included researching unique areas of the law, and always included discussing the legal issues with my supervising attorney, Caroline Kazakis. I do not think that it is a common experience in a summer internship to have so much interaction with real people in need of legal advice, be able to spend time looking into so many areas of the law, or conference so extensively with an experienced attorney about real legal issues.

In addition to intake calls, I also got to research and draft memos on a variety of issues facing CLCM's clients, including the best way to secure private day school placements for students with specific disabilities, how to reclaim credit in identity theft cases, and filing complaints for FERPA violations, among other issues. We also spent a lot of time out of the office meeting with clients and handling matters in court. It was an invaluable experience seeing how Caroline communicated with her juvenile clients as their attorney, which requires different technique than effectively communicating with kids as their teacher. Seeing her in the courtroom, too, exposed a completely different skill-set needed in this area of the law, and provided a great opportunity to observe and ask questions about the nuances of juvenile court.

I feel that my exposure to so many areas of the law and sides of juvenile representation was unique to my summer internship with CLCM, and reflects the comprehensive legal services that CLCM provides to its clients and the community. I feel so grateful for ability to spend my summer in such a progressive, professional, and welcoming community. The skills, knowledge, and relationships I developed during my time at CLCM will be things I will hold onto dearly as I begin my legal career, and I only hope that in the future I can serve my community as well as the lawyers and staff of CLCM already do every day.

Sincerely,

Jessica J. Wikström
Boston College Law School