

September 9th, 2011
Equal Justice America

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

Dear Equal Justice America,

Thank you for providing supplemental funding that made my summer internship possible. My internship with the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs was the perfect introduction to public interest legal work. I spent my summer working with the DC Prisoners' Project where I advocated for the humane treatment of incarcerated D.C. citizens, assisted their family members with prison-related issues, and supported litigation efforts to improve the overall prison system.

I received extensive training at the beginning of my externship on the complexities of laws governing prisoner litigation. Our attorneys also taught us how to approach our client work, both practically and emotionally. Working closely with prisoners was both an emotionally draining and fulfilling experience.

Our office received letters from hundreds of prisoners over the summer. Some prisoners who contacted us were looking for assistance with their criminal cases, which were out of the Lawyers' Committee's purview. In those instances I recommended other legal organizations that could assist those prisoners with their legal issue. Other prisoners were not sentenced under D.C. law, and thus we were also not able to take on their cases. If the prisoner requested something small, such as a list of local churches or a few cases, I would send that information to him or her.

Most of my time was spent assisting DC prisoners with immediate needs, such as a lack of adequate medical care. When a client wrote to us about jail staff not responding to his requests for help when he experienced several seizures in the middle of the night, I contacted the doctor in charge of the jail to ensure he received medical attention. When an incarcerated Vietnam veteran realized he was no longer receiving his VA benefits, we worked to make sure that the VA sent his checks to the prison. The client then wanted assistance contesting a VA determination about his benefits, so I spent two weeks contacting other organizations until I found one that was willing, and qualified, to take his case. To help clients whose cases the Lawyers' Committee did not take I updated a Pro Se Guide that detailed what causes of actions were available to inmates, legal restrictions placed on them, deadlines and statutes of limitations, and the elements of filing a legal claim.

I assisted a client in filing an FTCA claim concerning a sexual assault at a women's prison, followed by a conspiracy to silence the client. I worked with her to understand all the facts of her situation, offer understanding and support, and figure out the best way for her to receive justice and compensation for what happened to her. She was an incredibly strong individual and she was so grateful just to have someone listen to her story. While at the Lawyers' Committee I also worked with a client who had been assaulted at a local jail by two other inmates. We worked

with his public defender to figure out what really happened at the jail, including a review of medical records and video footage.

One of the most difficult aspects of working with prisoners is leading them through the administrative remedy process. Any incarcerated individual who wishes to bring a civil lawsuit must first complete the administrative remedy (grievance) process at his or her facility or he or she will be barred from court. These processes do not usually obtain any relief or change in situation for the client, and can sometimes lead to retaliation. Clients had a hard time understanding why they should go through a process that will not yield results, especially when staff thwarts the process by not returning forms and making the grievances untimely. But if a client wanted to retain their legal rights to a cause of action related to conditions of confinement, I had to encourage them through the process. To help with that I created two grievance guides, one for the D.C. Jail and one for the Correctional Treatment Facility run by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). After I created these easy to understand guides I sent them to every inmate who contacted me from one of those facilities.

The Lawyers' Committee was also committed to changing prison policies through class actions seeking injunctive remedies. I assisted with one such case this summer against a prison facility in Pennsylvania that was inducing inmate on inmate attacks. I was the first responder for any and every piece of mail from that facility and was charged with explaining to the inmates what the Lawyers' Committee was doing to change the conditions of the prison. This was especially difficult because we were unable to take any individual claims while the class action was pending. We also needed to ensure that each inmate went through the grievance process so that could be potential named plaintiffs. While I experienced heartache turning down individual clients as we prepared to file the action, I knew that our end goal would create widespread change touching the lives of those clients and more.

Overall I had an incredible summer experience that was made possible by Equal Justice America's generous supplemental funding. Thank you for supporting my efforts to pursue public interest law and I hope that many young people receive such support in the years to come.

Sincerely,

Julia Simon-Mishel
Class of 2013
University of Pennsylvania Law School



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND URBAN AFFAIRS

September 6, 2011

Mr. Dan Ruben
Equal Justice America
Building 11, Suite 204.
13540 East Boundary Rd
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing regarding our Equal Justice America Fellow, Julia Simon-Mishel. Julia interned with the D.C. Prisoners' Project of the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs from May 31 to August 5, 2011. She was a stand-out intern in every way: efficient, inquisitive, took initiative, and worked very hard to learn substantive prisoners' rights law. She will be an excellent attorney, and was truly deserving of the EJA fellowship.

By way of background, the D.C. Prisoners' Project is one of five substantive project areas of the Committee. The D.C. Prisoners' Project advocates for the humane treatment of incarcerated D.C. citizens, assists their family members with prison-related issues, and promotes progressive criminal justice reform. Legal Interns for the Committee have an opportunity to obtain hands-on experience with both the investigation and litigation of civil rights matters. Investigation activities include interviewing complainants and witnesses, reviewing documents, and preparing memoranda summarizing facts and analyzing the merits of complaints under relevant civil rights laws. Litigation activities include conducting legal research, drafting legal memoranda and pleadings and assisting in preparation for legal proceedings. Interns receive extensive training in civil rights law and regular supervision and feedback.

During this summer, Julia distinguished herself by volunteering without hesitation for difficult and time consuming tasks. For instance, she took on reviewing and responding to the many letters we receive from a federal institution currently experiencing extreme violence. Julia responded appropriately to each letter, updated our database and excel spreadsheets with new information she learned, sat in on telephone conferences and meetings on litigation strategy, and assumed a large role in managing the pre-filing investigation of our recently-filed class action suit on behalf of these prisoners.

In addition, Julia's research and writing were very good when she arrived and improved throughout the summer. She was able to quickly understand, research, and analyze the legal issues the attorneys were interested in exploring. In one specific instance, Julia was able to help us craft a Federal Tort Claim Administrative claim for a client that will be the basis of her future lawsuit for conspiracy to cover up a sexual assault by an officer. Julia was also able to research quickly and efficiently when we needed answers for pressing issues in active cases.

We thank the EJA for supporting public interest interns, and in particular, Ms. Julia Simon-Mishel this summer. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ivy Finkenstadt
Staff Attorney,
DC Prisoners' Project