

August 31, 2014

Mr. Dan Ruben
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13450 Far Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for choosing me as an Equal Justice America Fellow. I am extremely grateful for the support of your organization for the second year in a row. Again, the assistance I received from Equal Justice America made it possible for me to pursue an internship in legal services, even though the organization could not fund my work directly. My experience working with the Disabilities Law Project of the Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. in Wilmington, DE made me even more excited than I previously was about pursuing a career in public interest. Without the support of organizations like yours, the financial constraints of this work would be prohibitive. Equal Justice America and its sister organizations make me hopeful about the future of public interest legal work.

Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. (CLASI) is a remarkable organization, committed to serving every client with dignity and respect. I immediately felt welcomed and encouraged by the attorneys, paralegals and other support staff. When the attorney initially assigned as my supervisor unexpectedly left for a new position, the remaining attorneys in the Disabilities Law Project took time from their already busy schedule and caseloads to train me and make sure I had any necessary supervision. Working with special education law and state Protection and Advocacy System law were both completely new to me. My supervising attorney provided numerous resources to help me begin work in these areas and was always available to answer any questions. I received helpful and insightful feedback on all my assignments.

CLASI allowed me to expand on the experience I gained last summer working in direct legal services, and further hone my skills in this area. I was able to build on my interest in working with individuals with disabilities by expanding into issues related to special education, institutionalization and adult and children's mental health. In addition to interviewing clients and accompany attorneys to meetings, I also worked on complex research issues, prepared briefs submitted to Administrative Law Judges, and drafted letters to communicate with clients, physicians, schools, teachers and state agencies.

During the summer I worked on a number of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) cases. In each case I advocated on behalf of a client with disabilities whose application for SSI was denied by the Social Security Administration. CLASI had represented one client, a now nine-year old girl, for three years, in her application for SSI. The client, a severe asthmatic, was denied at the application and administrative hearing level, only to have a federal district court judge remand the case with instructions that the ALJ should give the testimony of her treating physician controlling weight. After waiting over a year for the ALJ hearing, which would possibly mean the awarding of not only continuing benefits, but also significant back benefits,

the hearing was scheduled for July 2nd. I researched how the client's new treatment, a monthly injection fit with the SSA disability guidelines and worked with her physician to better understand why she needed this treatment and its effects. I met with the client's mother to learn about how her daughter's asthma, and related health conditions, affected her quality of life, education, the family's expenses, and her future plans. I spoke to the nurse at her school and her teachers to try to understand how her asthma, her treatment, and its side effects impacted her education and social development.

All this work culminated in writing a portion of the brief CLASI submitted for the hearing. In my portion I described how the client's asthma, along with her obesity from corticosteroids and other treatments, excessive absences from school, and inability to participate in physical education, taken together, made her disabled under SSA's guidelines. My supervising attorney told me two weeks ago that the ALJ issued a fully favorable decision, relying largely on the reasoning in my portion of the brief. This effort, which involved coordinating with health care providers, educators, and the client's family demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the disability work, which fits perfectly with my background in public health.

As part of my work in special education, along with my supervising attorney, I assisted one family with thirteen-year old boy who was experiencing difficulty in his current school environment. The boy, only identified as requiring special education two years ago, had not adapted well to the alternative school in which his school district placed him. His mother came to CLASI after a public defender, who represented the boy on minor charges in mental health court, expressed concern about his education. A CLASI attorney was quickly able to answer all the family's questions about his education options, and for the first time ever, provide hope that there was an appropriate education setting in which he could learn. I helped prepare the mom and son for an Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting, which we attended with my supervising attorney. By clearly explaining why the status quo was not working and why the law required the district consider private facilities, we finally learned a few weeks ago that his application to a specialized school for children with similar learning disabilities and mental health issues was approved. He will begin the new school year in a setting in which he will have the best opportunity to learn, at no cost to his family. Witnessing how CLASI empowered the family to challenge the system and push for what their son needed in a complicated area of law encouraged me to learn more about special education law.

Thank you again for allowing me to pursue this invaluable opportunity. After my experience this summer I am more excited than ever to pursue a career in public interest. I will always be thankful for the support EJA provided to help me work towards this goal.

Sincerely,

Katharine Vengraitis
Temple Law Class of 2015