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Mr. Dan Ruben,

This summer I completed an internship with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (“LAF”), and the experience was simply unforgettable. Entering the summer, I could have never imagined how much I would have learned about the world of public interest poverty law. I came away from the summer with a wealth of newly developed legal tools, a deeper understanding of the complex administrative law surrounding public benefits organizations, and a profound respect for the lawyers who spend their days fighting for the rights and well-being of the less fortunate around us.

During the summer, I worked in the Public Benefits practice group at LAF. For the most part, my work involved Social Security Disability (“SSD”) benefits, Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”), and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (“SNAP”) benefits. For the SSD and SSI cases, I had the opportunity to meet with and interview clients, investigate their cases (through medical records, school records, doctor’s reports, family testimony, and other such sources), prepare ALJ hearing statements and requests for reconsideration, and—when necessary—attend the ALJ hearings themselves. For the SNAP cases, I directed the SNAP Pro Bono Project in coordination with local pro-bono advocates. When a SNAP case would come into the office, I would contact the client and briefly investigate the case. If it looked like we could help the client, I would attempt to find a pro bono advocate willing to take on the case, or if none were available, pursue the matter directly myself. Two cases from these areas particularly stand out.

First, I had the opportunity to work with a young client who had been taken off Social Security Disability benefits. At a very young age, the client was found to be disabled due to a severe speech impediment. As he grew into a middle-school aged student, his speech problems thankfully improved dramatically. However, due to a severe learning disability, the student still lagged several years behind his peers in all basic academic areas and—even with intense special education intervention—was unable to progress at an adequate pace with his peers. As an eighth grader, the student was reading on only a second grade level, and simply could not keep up with basic classroom instruction.

After meeting with the client and his mother, I was tasked with preparing a hearing statement for submission to the Administrative Law Judge. To meet the disability qualification standards as a minor, an individual must “functionally equal” the disability listings by having two “marked” limitations in specified domains of functioning, or have one “extreme” limitation in the same domains. I reviewed the available documentation, and despite the child’s severe limitations arising from his learning disability, I believed we would have a great deal of trouble meeting two marked limitations. After discussing this with my supervising attorney, she indicated that she trusted my instinct and allowed me the freedom to structure the argument how I desired. As such, I wrote

the statement urging the judge to consider an extreme limitation in the domain of “acquiring and using information.” I knew this may be a contentious argument because ALJ’s are apprehensive about finding extreme limitations, but I believed it was truly the best way to serve the client. To my joy, the judge accepted the argument at the client’s hearing, and made a fully favorable determination for the client. The mother was sincerely thankful for all the work done by LAF, and it was deeply warming to see her joyous reaction to the good news.

Another case which particularly resonated with me this summer was a SNAP benefit case for an elderly disabled client. The client lived alone since the passing of her husband, and after being scammed out of thousands of dollars by a predatory scam operation, the client relied heavily on SNAP benefits for her monthly food supply. However, when the client recertified for SNAP benefits at the beginning of the summer, the local Public Aid Office believed she was only entitled to a fraction of the benefits that she was previously receiving. The client was deeply troubled by this determination and was desperate to figure out whether there was a proper reason for the reduction in benefits.

When the case arrived on my desk, I contacted the client to speak with her, and began to calculate her income, expenses, and other relevant monetary factors. Since no pro bono attorneys were available to take this project, I undertook the client’s case myself. After a good deal of digging and investigation, I determined that the Public Aid office was not including the client’s supplemental medical insurance as they were required to under the applicable policy regulations. I appealed the client’s case through the Public Aid Office, and was able to convince the caseworker to rectify the situation through informal channels, rather than having to bring the client in for a formal appeals hearing. Indeed, after the appeals coordinator conceded the medical expense and recorded the expense into the Public Aid systems, it was determined that the client was entitled to retroactive benefits from previous months as well. We ensured that these retroactive benefits were provided to the client, and that her full eligibility continued going forward. The client was ecstatic about the result, and was deeply appreciative of our work. It was highly rewarding to ensure that the client received the full benefits to which she was entitled, as she was in desperate need of the SNAP assistance.

My summer with LAF was a rewarding, challenging, and truly unforgettable experience. I sincerely appreciate the support of Equal Justice America in helping to make this summer possible. I strongly believe in the mission of Equal Justice America, and believe the support you provide to law students like me helps to make that mission a reality. Thank you so very much for your support.

Best Wishes,

Kevin Zimmerman

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The University of Chicago: The Law School
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