

August 30, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Equal Justice America and sponsor Kelley Drye & Warren LLP for my Law Student Fellowship at University Legal Services (ULS) this past summer. My fulfilling experience at ULS allowed me to combine my developing legal skills with my past experiences as a special education teacher to advocate on behalf of youth with disabilities in the District of Columbia. My work at ULS included a variety of instructive and consequential projects.

In June, I researched, prepared, and presented testimony to the District of Columbia City Council regarding proposed legislation regulating treatment of special education students in out-of-state private schools. The legislation was written in response to the District's realization that a Massachusetts school serving District special education students used electric shocks to modify student behaviors. The individuals subjected to these shocks include students with autism, intellectual disabilities, or emotional disabilities, some of whom are nonverbal. Due to lack of regulation and reporting requirements, it is impossible to know how many other schools use similarly disturbing "aversives" on students. The written and oral testimony I gave offered support for the legislation, provided analysis of similar laws in other states, and proposed suggestions for strengthening the law to protect District students from the wide range of abusive practices performed on individuals with disabilities. I was proud and honored to advocate on behalf of students with disabilities about such an important issue. When I concluded my teaching career and my own students asked me why I was leaving to go to law school, I assured them that I planned to continue to work on their behalf in a broader context. By providing input to the City Council on the District's aversives legislation, I was able to uphold that promise.

Throughout the summer, I regularly went with a ULS staff attorney to visit an acute psychiatric hospital serving children and adolescents. The purposes of our visits were threefold: to inform the patients about their rights, to follow up on specific concerns raised by patients or staff members, and to observe the hospital's daily functions firsthand. I hope that the most important general consequence of our presence in the hospital was raising staff members' awareness about the legal rights of all psychiatric patients. Neglect and abuse happen too frequently in psychiatric care facilities, but by participating in the visits I helped require accountability and ensure provision of quality mental health services for children and adolescents.

I also assisted in providing legal representation to one child who had been in that hospital for over three months, despite its intended function as a short-term placement. I participated in meetings with the child and his mother and learned about their concerns and priorities. Then I traveled with the attorney to Norfolk, Virginia to evaluate a residential school being considered as a potential long-term placement. By making recommendations about the child's next placement based on his own circumstances and wishes, ULS was able to give him a voice that probably would have otherwise gone unacknowledged.

Throughout my Fellowship at ULS, I also conducted research and organized records for an ongoing class action lawsuit on behalf of Social Security recipients whose finances were mishandled by representative payees. In addition, I drafted a memo analyzing legislative regulatory trends regarding seclusion and restraint in treatment facilities for individuals with disabilities. I also worked to obtain appropriate special education services for several individual District of Columbia Public School students.

I want to reiterate my appreciation to Equal Justice America and Kelley Drye. Because I found my summer Fellowship at ULS so gratifying, I have chosen to extend my internship there into the fall semester. I look forward to continuing my protection and advocacy work on behalf of individuals with disabilities in the coming months.

Sincerely,

Nicole Poland
J.D. Candidate, 2010
The George Washington University