

September 2, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you again for the Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship. I have long been interested in public interest work, but the lack of available funding made it difficult to take public interest jobs while supporting myself. Equal Justice America's generosity allowed me to take a summer job at the National Employment Law Project (NELP), a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for workers, particularly low-wage employees. After my wonderful summer experience at NELP, I am now certain that I would like to pursue public interest work.

Over the summer at NELP, I was part of a team focusing on policy and advocacy work. As a result, my work primarily involved research, writing, and outreach. I had the opportunity to work on a variety of projects over the summer, which spanned from issues affecting low-wage workers to those affecting management-level employees. I spent the most time working on a project centered on an upcoming change by the Department of Labor to the regulations governing exemptions to the overtime and minimum wage law for white-collar employees. Many workers who perform manual labor or who do not have management duties are misclassified as "exempt" white collar executives, and as a result, they are not paid overtime. The purpose of this project was to educate concerned parties, including policy-makers and media, about the necessity of updating the regulations that define who qualifies as an exempt white-collar employee.

In the process of doing this, I had the opportunity to speak to a variety of workers from different backgrounds about many different issues. These workers were from all over the country, young and old, and their job duties ranged from unloading boxes off a truck to supervising factory workers to appraising houses. However, they all had some things in common: they had a story to tell, they wanted to tell it, and they all needed legal assistance. It was an eye-opening experience to see how eager they were to share their stories and how much they wanted someone to hear them out.

As an example, I spoke to a woman who earned around \$37,000 per year working as a "Store Manager" in Alabama. Despite her title, she spent most of her time loading and unloading heavy boxes, working the cash register, and stocking shelves. She worked up to 80 hours per week and never received overtime because she was classified as a white collar executive. As a result of the heavy lifting and physical labor, she eventually suffered back and shoulder injuries that required surgery. The company let her go when, after surgery, her physical therapist prohibited her from lifting more than 25 pounds.

Although I spent only a short time at NELP, it had a profound impact on me. Being able to give a voice to so many people made me realize the importance of public interest work in a way I had not before. Working at NELP also demonstrated to me that lawyers can work for change at multiple levels in society. Although litigation is a very important step in helping workers secure their rights, advocating for legislative changes and updates to regulations can also have a profound impact. My summer experience opened my eyes to new avenues of public interest work, and I want to once again thank Equal Justice America for making it possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nima Afshar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Nima" and last name "Afshar" clearly distinguishable.

Nima Afshar  
Fordham University School of Law  
JD Candidate, May 2015