

July 8, 2015

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Through the Equal Justice America (EJA) Fellowship, I was one of six student directors for the Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) Project. Our project is run through Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut. We staff an office at the local courthouse, where we assist applicants for temporary restraining orders; usually our applicants are facing situations of domestic, dating, or interpersonal violence. The application process for a TRO is complicated, involving a number of detailed forms, and the employees at the courthouse are generally overworked. Thus, our project provides an important service to the community. Additionally, as directors, we are responsible for recruiting and training dozens of other students at Yale Law School to help staff the office. The TRO Project serves as many students' (myself included) first opportunity to work with clients in a legal setting, and provides a chance for students to get involved with the New Haven community. My specific role as a director included coordinating the volunteer schedule for the year, managing our budget, assisting in training volunteers and fielding questions throughout the year, and staffing the office (assisting applicants). Working for the TRO Project can be frustrating, especially since many applicants come in facing violent or dangerous situations, but are unable to obtain TROs despite our assistance because they do not fit the statutory criteria. Specifically, the applicant and the respondent must be related by blood or marriage, have been in a romantic relationship, or live together. Thus, if someone is receiving threats from their neighbor, for example, we are generally unable to help them. Still, on the whole, I think that I helped a significant number of people navigate a tricky application process, and obtain some protection.

Three of the applicants I worked with this year especially stick out in my mind. First, this fall, a woman came to the office who was seeking a temporary restraining order against her husband, from whom she was separated. Having finally extricated herself from an emotionally abusive home situation, she still faced threats and harassment from him. Even worse, he persisted in harassing her son, who was over the age of 18. Unfortunately, the law does not permit restraining orders to cover adult children, so she was unable to secure protection for her son that day. However, I did successfully assist her in obtaining a temporary restraining order. I remember this applicant in particular for two reasons. First, on a more interpersonal level, I was amazed at the level of energy and optimism that the applicant had, in spite of the extremely difficult situation she was in. Second, in spite of her friendly and cooperative nature, I remember her because she spoke quickly and unceasingly, to the point where I had to politely interrupt her in order to finish the lengthy application process that afternoon. The judge generally stops hearing cases around 4:30, and filling out the questionnaires often takes over an hour. I did not want to send her away without having seen the judge that day, in the hope that she would have a TRO by the evening. More often than not, I have found applicants (understandably) reticent to share their stories. However, this applicant finally had a

forum in which to share her story, and once she began to tell it, she couldn't stop. As a result, this applicant was an important learning experience for me – I had to balance being an active and supportive listener, with focusing her on the task at hand.

The other two applicants I remember most vividly came in together, with two small children. They were a couple, and the woman's ex-husband (and father to one of the children) had been harassing her new partner, ultimately physically assaulting him on the street in front of one of their children. The man had a large bruise on his face. While the male applicant spoke fluent English, his wife mostly spoke Spanish, with very limited English. Thus, the man did most of the talking, explaining their family situation, how her ex-husband had assaulted him, and how her older, teenage son (who had not come with them) was now afraid to leave their house. Both the man and woman applied for TROs, and each included their children on their form, since they were all under 18. I explained to them that while the woman fit the statutory criteria, the man may not be eligible for a TRO against his new partner's ex-husband. The applicant was very upset to learn this, exclaiming how he had been threatened and physically harmed. I did the best I could to explain the process, while remaining empathetic. I internally agreed with him that the law should cover him as well, but I did not want to upset him further. Unfortunately, in the end, I was right-- while the woman and her children received a TRO, the man did not, despite the injury that was plain on his face. This situation is all too common in our office—in spite of our best efforts, we cannot help everyone who walks through the door. However, I think that this is an important lesson for any attorney to learn; in spite of what may seem right or just, you cannot always win.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this EJA Fellowship. I truly enjoyed being a director for the TRO Project at Yale Law School this past year. I learned a great deal about working with clients, and I hope that I made a difference in the New Haven community.

Sincerely,

Becca Loomis  
Yale Law School  
Class of 2017