

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing to describe my internship experience at the Urban Justice Center's Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project (HOPP) and to thank Equal Justice America for your support of my work.

HOPP is dedicated to ensuring access to public benefits through a combination of direct legal services, impact litigation, and policy research and advocacy. The project is aptly named a prevention project as public assistance is meant to be a safety net for families and individuals who would otherwise have nowhere to turn.

As a legal intern, my primary responsibilities included staffing a weekly legal clinic, representing clients at administrative fair hearings, and conducting legal research to support potential class action suits. While I was given comprehensive training in public benefits law and the administrative process, much of my learning came from on-the-job experiences working with clients, welfare centers, and administrative law judges.

The process of applying for and maintaining public assistance is an incredibly circuitous and arduous process. Clients are systemically mistreated and given confusing or incorrect information at welfare centers, job centers, and even fair hearings. These issues are compounded by the fact that it can take up to three months (in reality it often takes much longer) between requesting a fair hearing and receiving a decision. Then, the welfare center has another month to actually comply. In the end, rectifying an error can take upwards of half a year.

It was especially gratifying for me to represent clients who had been mistreated in their fair hearing. While the fair hearings are supposed to protect an individual's due process rights and provide him or her with the opportunity to be heard, too often our clients had the opposite experience. One client, a mother of three, missed a mandatory welfare work appointment because she had a job interview on the same day. However, her welfare center failed to record the note she brought from her interviewer. As a result her case was sanctioned and she faced a pro-rata reduction in her cash assistance. Our client was only informed of this sanction when her toddler's childcare payments, previously paid for through her public benefits, were discontinued. When she went in for her fair hearing *pro se*, the administrative law judge, ALJ, continuously interrupted and berated her. Not only was she unable to present complete testimony about her job interview, she was not offered the opportunity to submit the note from her interviewer. The judge upheld the sanction on the grounds that her testimony was not credible because she did not have a corroborating document. I worked on an Article 78, an appeal to State Court, to challenge the ALJ's decision.

Another client I worked with had secured a temporary job for the holiday season. She reported her income to her welfare center and her cash grant was reduced accordingly (cash grants are tied to income level). When her job concluded she, again, reported it to her welfare center and requested that they update her information and cash grant. However, the center continuously failed to do so and she was still receiving a reduced cash grant to support herself and her family several months later. She then received a notice informing her that her cash assistance would be terminated due to her failure to fill out a form relating to her job – the job she no longer had. While city regulations allow the city to request current information about a recipient's work status, our client was in full compliance with the law. There is no authority supporting duplicitous requests, and in fact, there are laws forbidding such requests. The client initially represented herself but was so badly treated by the ALJ that the State Commissioner decided to reopen her case *de novo*. I was able to represent her at this second hearing and submitted a memo of law explaining our position.

Through this internship I deepened my understanding of the role that the law and lawyers can play in promoting social and economic equality, I further developed my ability to serve as a strong oral advocate, and strengthened my research and writing skills. Thank you for allowing me to work alongside my clients in fighting to secure their public benefits.

Sincerely,

Shlomit Cohen
NYU School of Law
Class of 2014