

To: Dan Ruben, Executive Director at Equal Justice America
From: Daniella Lees
Re: Reflection on my summer at Friends of Farmworkers

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I had the opportunity to work at Friends of Farmworkers, a nonprofit legal services organization that provides free legal assistance to low-wage immigrant workers in Pennsylvania. A substantial portion of my summer work focused on the intersection of labor law and immigration. The clients I worked with were victims of labor trafficking, and our office assisted these individuals in applying for T nonimmigrant visas. The clients we served were trapped in abusive employment situations – employers often took advantage of these workers' undocumented status to lower their wages and worsen their working conditions. Over the course of my summer, I helped apply for T visas for six clients.

Before starting at Friends of Farmworkers, I had no experience in applying for T visas, and I had only a cursory knowledge of the visa requirements. Like most people, when I thought of human trafficking, my mind went immediately to the image of undocumented workers who were smuggled and forced to work for little pay in horrendous working and living conditions. What I found throughout my summer, however, was that victims of labor trafficking came in all forms, and that even if individuals did not fit within the quintessential notion of trafficking, they were still in fact victims of labor trafficking. The hardest part of my summer work was finding a way to describe the visa to potential clients. Many of our clients did not identify as “victims of labor trafficking”, and while cognizant of the fact that their working conditions weren't great, did not think to complain about their wages and working conditions. I often had to keep in mind that these individuals were coming from poverty and violence and were just thankful for the fact that they were able to send money home to their families in Mexico.

The six workers I helped this summer all worked for the same landscaping company, and they all shared a similar experience at the company. All of the clients were forced to work over twelve-hour days in all weather conditions. Pay was arbitrarily deducted from their check for broken equipment, 5-6 hours of pay was missing from their checks every week, and they were never paid for the overtime hours they worked. Additionally, the workers were often threatened with deportation if they complained about the missing hours, and their supervisors often threatened to blacklist the workers with area employers if they sought other employment. The supervisors repeatedly verbally harassed the workers and threatened their families in Mexico. This is just a fraction of the abuse the workers suffered. I feel fortunate to have been given the opportunity to learn from these individuals, listen to their stories, and help them fight back against unlawful employment practices.

It was surprising to learn that very few immigration practitioners screen for T-visa eligibility. Of the 5,000 trafficking visas allotted by Congress each year, Vermont Service Center, the adjudicative body responsible for granting T-visas, receives only 500 applications each year. To date, Friends of Farmworkers has applied for thirty trafficking visas and fourteen have been granted. I am so thankful that I got to play a part in possibly helping six workers achieve stable immigration status.

Aside from my duties inside the office, I also had the opportunity to raise awareness about unlawful employment practices through various types of outreach. I attended the Guatemalan Mobile Consulate in Chambersburg, the Mexican Mobile Consulate in Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, and conducted outreach at various mushroom farms in Kennett Square, PA, and Christmas tree farms in Allentown, PA. At the Mobile Consulates, our organization set up a table where people could come and ask us questions throughout the day. We also gave “know your rights” presentations throughout the day to the individuals waiting to get their documentation. A large portion of this outreach involved referring individuals to other nonprofit legal organizations that could better address their legal need.

For the camp outreach, we would often rent a car and drive around to various H-2A and H-2B labor camps. Most often, the employer-provided housing was far removed from the farm itself, which meant we would sometimes drive around for fifteen minutes before finding the housing. We would then hand out “know your rights” pamphlets and talk to the workers about their current employment situation. Sometimes the workers would talk to us and other times they wouldn’t. I found that doing outreach was a delicate balance between respecting the wishes of the workers while still providing them with the information necessary to help protect their rights. Often times the workers didn’t want to get in trouble with their employers, so they would tell us everything was fine and just listen to what we had to say. Some of the workers felt so fortunate to have a job in the first place that they didn’t want to complain about the working conditions, especially when the job paid nearly three times as much as they earned in Mexico or Guatemala. Other times the workers would talk to us and express concerns about various problems at work, whether it be pay, a work-related injury, or discrimination based on their country of origin. All in all, I found the outreach to be the most difficult yet rewarding part of my summer internship. I look forward to joining Friends of Farmworkers in the fall when they do outreach at various apple farms throughout Eastern PA.

Respectfully,



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