

August 30, 2017

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

Equal Justice America Summer 2017 Fellowship Recipient Letter

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I wanted to thank you and the rest of the Equal Justice America team for your generous support of my summer internship at Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS). Without your kind assistance, I would not otherwise have been able to afford to work at GBLS and learn from the experiences and mentorship I gained through this summer. I tremendously benefitted from this experience working in poverty law, and it has significantly impacted my perspective on the intricacies of the law, the interrelatedness of legal and service organizations, and areas in need of legal and policy advocacy, as well as goals for my own future career.

At GBLS this summer, I provided legal assistance for low-income individuals in the greater Boston area in a variety of capacities, including drafting Medicaid appeals for elders and individuals with disabilities, handling housing and benefits issues for low-income seniors, managing eviction defense cases for tenants in public and subsidized housing, discussing special education and school discipline rights for children with disabilities, and assisting in pre-class action litigation negotiation discussions with a major urban school district. I also had the opportunity to volunteer at a local elder services fair, where I heard the stories of various elders in the community and advised them as to how they could obtain legal advice or other assistance for their concerns. While I greatly appreciated learning the substantive elements of each of these areas of law, I was particularly struck by how wonderful it was to get to know the various clients I served during my time at GBLS. Hearing their stories, and getting the chance to see how GBLS could help them pursue their legal goals, taught me so much about how civil legal aid societies can help give a voice and opportunity to the communities they serve.

I had the immense pleasure of getting to know a client who was an elder in the Cambridge community, an immigrant from Barbados whose recent serious knee injury had prevented him from pursuing further work and forced an early retirement. Not only was I able to connect him with other service providers in the area who were going to assist him with getting access to affordable mental health services, but I was also able to help him prepare his application for disability-related benefits and successfully apply for food stamps. Through the course of our meetings at the office, I learned so much about his life – his adoration for his grandchildren, his love of eccentric hats, the joy he found in volunteering for food banks – that made me treasure our discussions and made every legal victory seem more worthwhile because I knew exactly how much it meant to my client. I cannot express how invaluable it was to be able to provide him and others like him with both a greater sense of financial security and the opportunity for peace of mind.

As someone who has several family members and friends who struggle with mental illness and disability and who previously worked as a health services researcher for children with disabilities, it was also especially meaningful for me to assist clients in several matters related to the intersection of their health status and the law. For example, I greatly appreciated the opportunity to conduct intakes and research on behalf of parents of children with disabilities who were looking to find out more about their rights concerning education and healthcare services. Working with one parent in particular, a single mother of two children with severe behavioral and developmental disabilities, was especially rewarding; we were able to provide her with valuable information regarding the procedural process for adjusting her son's Individualized Educational Program and later to help her navigate the eviction process to keep her housing and children's educational plans intact. I cannot express how wonderful it was to help her understand her and her children's rights and realize her own agency in the midst of difficult circumstances. I was so grateful to be able to serve as a legal advocate for her to affirm that her children had a right to access an education that fit their educational needs.

My summer at GBLS was eye-opening and educational, but above all, it was inspiring. I came to law school knowing that I was already dedicated to a career in public interest. However, my time at GBLS taught me so much about how I as an individual can serve the needs of individuals directly and how much I truly love being able to do so. I care deeply about pursuing further experiences in poverty law and to find out more on how I can dedicate my efforts to support our communities' most vulnerable individuals in meaningful, tangible ways. I believe that the work done by GBLS is of the utmost importance, and I am honored to have had the privilege to learn from the incredible attorneys at GBLS and to contribute to this work in even a small way. Thank you again for making this experience possible and for giving me the opportunity to serve a community that means so much to me.

All the best,

Cassandra (Casey) Thomson
University of Michigan Law School
Anticipated Graduation in May 2019



GREATER BOSTON
LEGAL SERVICES

Cambridge & Somerville Legal Services Office

August 29, 2017

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

Re: **Fellowship Evaluation for Cassandra Thomson**

Dear Mr. Ruben:

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter on behalf of our recent summer legal intern, Cassandra (Casey) Thomson. Casey was outstanding! Casey handled a wide range of individual poverty law-based cases, under my close supervision, including housing and public benefits issues for low income seniors; eviction defense cases for tenants in public and subsidized housing; special education and school discipline rights for kids with disabilities; plus assistance in pre-class action litigation negotiations with a major urban school district. Casey's work was universally stellar. She was supremely compassionate and effective in all of her communications with our clients, including some clients with challenging psychiatric and other behavioral disabilities. Casey is extraordinarily well organized, efficient, fantastic at multitasking, and she is by far the best note-taker of any of the countless law students I have supervised over more than 30 years -- Casey's notes of complex meetings and conversations are nearly verbatim reflections of every detail of the discussion! Casey's legal writing and research skills are also excellent.

Casey also took lovely initiative to go above and beyond in empathically helping our clients, particularly seniors, with tasks and issues that exceeded the scope of the precise legal issue we were working on, but nevertheless gave the elders increased peace of mind. For example, Casey accompanied an elder and her adult daughter to the Social Security Administration office to help clarify longstanding confusing communications; she helped a homeless elder with Medicaid and social service-related needs beyond her presenting legal issue; Casey assisted multiple clients with completing and then following up with food stamp applications to ensure prompt and maximum food stamp benefits; and in several cases Casey communicated in great detail with other local social service providers to whom we were referring seniors for assistance that wasn't within our priorities – and provided the social service representatives with such detailed and ample information that it enabled them to much more effectively assist the clients.

Mr. Dan Ruben
August 29, 2017
Page 2

Casey had fortunate timing for her internship. She arrived just when I, along with other lawyers from our agency, were getting ready to file a class action lawsuit against a large urban school district regarding unlawful school suspensions and other violations of the state school discipline reform law. After we sent the school district's attorney a copy of the class action complaint that we were about to file in court, the school district officials immediately sought to engage in pre-litigation settlement discussions. Throughout Casey's internship, she got to participate in several large negotiation sessions that involved multiple representatives from both sides, as well as several of our team's internal strategizing discussions. These pre-litigation negotiations were particularly interesting and educational for Casey to observe, and these opportunities are not routine in our practice.

We deeply appreciate EJA's financial support for Casey Thomson's summer legal internship. Casey was an invaluable contributor in our office, and everyone in our office thoroughly enjoyed her presence. We would absolutely welcome Casey back, should she want to do any additional internships in our office to get an even more varied set of poverty law experiences. Casey was a great asset to our office, and most especially to the clients she served.

Sincerely,



Deborah Filler
Senior Staff Attorney
Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services