

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

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Dear Mr. Ruben,

I began clerking for Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid's Immigration Law Project in the fall of 2016. I had recently returned from two years in Guatemala with the Peace Corps, and was immediately drawn to ILP's work, which focuses on providing pro bono representation for immigrants unable to afford legal services. Many ILP clients came to the United States fearing for their lives, fleeing home countries decimated by war, gang violence, repressive regimes, genocide, or corruption. ILP works with these individuals as they seek to obtain, or maintain, legal status within the United States. The work is critically important, as removal to countries of origin may re-expose immigrants to life-threatening situations, and tears them apart from the lives and families they have created here in the United States.

While my experiences with MMLA during the fall and spring semesters were invaluable, the full-time summer clerkship position has allowed for far greater understanding of the varied field of immigration law. I have worked with ILP attorneys and their clients on VAWA, U visa, adjustment of status, and naturalization applications, and assisted with the Minnesota Detention Project, which provides pro bono representation for detained individuals currently in removal proceedings. In addition, I performed legal research on numerous topics, including the immigration consequences of particular criminal convictions, false claims to citizenship, and determinations of moral character. The highlight by far, however, has been working directly with clients to prepare their affidavits, statements, and necessary documentation for their immigration applications.

Although challenging to work on, I have found U visa applications particularly rewarding. U visas provide legal status to immigrants who were the victims of certain qualifying crimes. In order to qualify for a U visa, the immigrant must also have assisted with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of the associated crime. Therefore, U visas make communities safer by encouraging undocumented immigrants to report crimes to local authorities. Many ILP clients or their family members have been the victims of horrific crimes, and the U visa allows these individuals to remain in the United States and receive the rehabilitative and recovery services they desperately need. Unfortunately, the USCIS office that processes U visa applications is severely backlogged, currently processing applications that were submitted in August 2014, leaving many applicants in a state of continued uncertainty.

Another interesting aspect of my summer experience has been observing the ILP adapt to the ever-changing needs of the immigrant community. Under the new administration, ICE apprehensions and removal proceedings have significantly increased. This is true across the board, even for immigrants whose only criminal history involves illegally entering the United States. Individuals can even be placed in removal proceedings for charges that are still pending against them. Once detained, the immigrant's ability to obtain representation and effectively prepare any sort of defense is greatly reduced. Many individuals speak to a lawyer for the first time on the date of their initial court hearing, and a great number proceed pro se. Tragically, many elect to return to dangerous conditions in their home country, rather than remain in jail, even when potential relief exists. This forces them to leave parents, spouses, and children behind in the United States. And, while criminal prosecutions in the United States utilize the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard, removal proceedings only require the government to introduce "clear and convincing evidence." Given the stakes involved, this lowered standard is a gross injustice.

Due to these recent changes, Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid has begun to represent individuals in removal proceedings, new territory for the ILP. Their attorneys have decided to prioritize individuals with mental illnesses or disabilities, filling a major need for representation. I have nothing but admiration and respect for ILP and its attorneys, and plan on continuing my clerkship during the academic year. It has been an honor to work alongside them this summer, and to observe how they work with the immigrant community to address their needs and collectively stand up for their rights. I want to thank Equal Justice America for the support they provided, and for helping to make my summer clerkship with Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid possible. I truly appreciate your help and support. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like further information regarding Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid and its work.

Sincerely,

Paul Dimick

University of Minnesota Law School
Class of 2019