

August 23, 2017

Mr. Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Building II, Suite 204  
Midlothian, VA 23122

Dear Mr. Ruben:

As a law clerk at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) this summer, I had the opportunity to work on both housing cases and mental health directive cases for clients with mental illnesses. During my ten weeks at TRLA, I gained substantive casework experience with the clients I helped, and I also learned concrete skills—related to litigation, document drafting, and clinic planning—that will help me in my future public interest law work.

The mental health work I assisted with involved preparing for, coordinating and executing a Psychiatric Advance Directive clinic. For the clinic, two attorneys and I conducted extensive interviews with clients with severe mental illness who had previous psychiatric hospitalizations. We queried them on their psychiatric history and treatment preferences, and counseled them about their rights when they experience psychiatric crises or involuntary commitments. After interviewing the clients, we drafted Psychiatric Advance Directives, Medical Powers of Attorney, and Directives for Mental Health Treatment for each client. We then met with each client again, reviewed the documents and made any requested changes, and helped the clients execute the forms.

In addition to interviewing clients and drafting directives during the clinics, I helped develop partnerships with mental health organizations in Austin to reach out to clients in need of these directives. To do this, I collaborated with the Self-Help Advocacy Center (“the SHAC”) and Austin Travis County Integral Care. We hosted clinics at both of these locations, and were able to serve interested clients of both agencies.

The housing cases I worked on all involved clients with mental health diagnoses as well. One client, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and dementia, was threatened with the termination of his housing voucher for unreasonably minor, isolated incidents involving his neighbors. I assisted in representing him at his termination hearing, and we were successfully able to convince the housing authority to allow him to keep his voucher so long as he sought community supports to help him remain stable in his apartment. In another case, I helped a client with severe depression make a reasonable accommodation request to her landlord to transfer to a complex that was closer to her family, so that they could help her with daily living activities that she struggled with due to her mental illness. In the end—despite the landlord’s initial obstruction—the client was able to transfer with the landlord’s permission.

Another housing case I worked on involved the type of issue I hope to target in a post-graduate fellowship at TRLA. This case involved a client with a mental illness who was denied an

apartment in public housing on the basis of his criminal history. Specifically, the housing authority denied his application because he had a recent drug possession conviction; the client said that he had been self-medicating while he was not receiving mental health treatment. I researched relevant HUD guidance and federal regulations, and drafted a letter requesting the housing authority reconsider their decision to deny the client, in light of the disability-related nature of his conviction. Although the housing authority did not respond before the end of my summer at TRLA, I am hopeful that the denial will be overturned.

I found my summer at TRLA to be highly rewarding, especially because of all the client-focused work I was able to do. I found the work to be so meaningful because I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to receive the type of treatment they want, and live in a safe, decent apartment. These rights are fundamental, and I was grateful to be able to help clients safeguard them through my summer work. I assisted clients in very tangible ways during my time as a clerk, and I was able to watch experienced attorneys represent clients in hearings and strategize how to handle the nuances of their cases, which gave me additional insights into effective public interest lawyering. I am grateful to Equal Justice America for supporting my summer experience there. I would highly recommend to other students that they spend a summer at TRLA, and I hope to receive a fellowship to work there, doing similar work, as a post-graduate fellow.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Marissa Latta".

Marissa Latta  
The University of Texas School of Law, Class of 2018

**LAW OFFICE OF  
TEXAS RIOGRANDE LEGAL AID INC.**

Alpine  
114 N. 6th  
Alpine, TX 79830  
Telephone (432) 837-1199  
Fax (432) 837-9946

August 31, 2017

Mr. Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Building II, Suite 204  
Midlothian, VA 23122

Re: Marissa Latta, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid Summer 2017 Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I supervised Marissa Latta during her summer fellowship with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid and highly recommend her for an equal justice fellowship.

During her fellowship, Marissa worked both with the housing team and the mental health team, helping clients with mental illnesses. People with serious mental illnesses are challenging clients and an underserved priority population, usually with many legal problems: enforcement of civil rights related to hospitalization and criminal justice interactions; access to appropriate community-based mental health treatment; relief from housing and employment discrimination; and assistance with consumer and family law issues.

On the housing team, Marissa helped clients avoid homelessness and enforce their rights. She negotiated with their landlords to make reasonable accommodations, defended against threatened evictions, fought terminations of section 8 vouchers, and assisted with representation during a termination hearing.

For her work on the mental health team, she worked with me assisting clients execute psychiatric advance directives. These directives provide individuals with mental illnesses a crisis self-determination mechanism. The directives also allow individuals with mental illnesses to avert crises before they arise by providing information about their illness that is helpful to law enforcement, crisis personnel, family, friends, and mental health workers.

Marissa was instrumental in organizing and conducting a psychiatric advance directive clinic. Assisting individuals with these directives requires patience, understanding, extensive interviews with each client and careful drafting and editing of the directive. Marissa was able to establish a rapport with her clients and obtain the detailed information she needed for each individualized advanced directive she drafted. A fictionalized example of such an advanced directive is attached.

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Marissa has a unique ability to connect with this population and she is an extraordinary asset to advocacy on behalf of people with mental illness. She is committed to furthering justice and equality for all, particularly the most marginalized of our society.

I am proud to call Marissa a colleague and to welcome her to our profession. I hope she returns to TRLA after she graduates.

Sincerely,

Laurie Hallmark  
Attorney

Enclosure: Fictionalized Psychiatric Advance Directive

