

Dan Ruben
Executive Director at Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I spent the summer before my third year of law school working at the Olean office of Legal Assistance of Western New York. Legal Assistance of Western New York (“Law New York”) is a non-profit legal aid office located about a ninety minute drive outside of Buffalo, NY, about a fifteen minute drive from the Pennsylvania border. There are seven Law New York offices located in the western half of New York state. Working with Law New York was extremely beneficial to me because I am aspiring to work in a legal aid office after graduation. My internship at Law New York provided me with hands-on client experience, which I previously had little experience with. Additionally, it provided me with extensive exposure to areas of law that are commonly handled in legal aid offices, such as family law and bankruptcy.

I spent the majority of my internship working directly with the Equal Justice Works Elder Justice Fellow on cases helping clients over sixty prevent and get relief from elder abuse and financial exploitation. I helped the Elder Justice Fellow with his caseload, which included working with older adult clients to revoke and create new power of attorney documents to prevent financial abuse from agents under previous power of attorney documents. I performed a large amount of bankruptcy related research to help protect older adult clients from harassment from creditors and stress related to extensive debts. I also worked with clients directly and input information about their assets into Best Case software. Helping vulnerable clients empower themselves to protect their assets and their physical safety was exciting and motivating.

In addition to working with the Equal Justice Works Elder Justice Fellow on his caseload, I also performed a large amount of research in support of family court cases and observed a number of family court proceedings. One of the family court proceedings I observed was the entering of a refrain from order of protection against an elderly couple’s grandson preventing him from continuing to harm his grandparents. I also assisted in interviewing family court clients.

The highlight of my internship was organizing a name change clinic for transgender and gender non-conforming residents of Olean and surrounding areas. This clinic was important to me because it helped a number of clients avoid exposure as a transgender individual when they

need to use their legal name and therefore also help limit gender-identity motivated discrimination and violence. Before the Olean clinic, I received extensive training on the name change process and cultural competency and also participated in name change clinics at two other Law New York offices. At these clinics, I sat with clients and asked questions to create a name change petition to file at court. After the clinic at our Jamestown office, I prepared all of the supporting documents for the name change based on templates from our name change trainer. These documents included a request that the requirement to publish name changes in the newspaper be waived due to the risk of violence that it poses for transgender and gender non-conforming clients.

Planning the Olean clinic involved finding appropriate places to advertise the clinic that were not likely to attract hateful attention to our clinic time and location. By the morning of the clinic, we only had one client signed up. However, two additional clients signed up in the hour before the clinic started. The last minute preparation that followed this quick change was extremely helpful in teaching me how to manage the moving pieces of giving clients undivided attention while also remaining organized and preparing necessary paperwork in a timely fashion.

During the clinic, I worked with each client and a pro bono attorney to complete the name change petitions. This involved asking sensitive information about gender identity, marital status, criminal history, and financial status. After the clinic, I completed the supplemental documents, traveled with an attorney from our office to file the documents at the county courthouse, and followed up with each client about the status of the petition. This clinic was the first time that I handled a case from beginning to end, and the experience was extremely rewarding.

Overall, my experience working at Law New York taught me first-hand what day-to-day life looks like working in a legal aid office. This experience was extremely helpful to my career development, as well as to my general understanding of law and society.

Sincerely,

/s/ Sarah Lentes

University of Wisconsin, 2018