

September 22, 2015

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13450 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

On behalf of the other members of the Class of 2017 at the University of Chicago Law School who spent their summers at LAF, thank you very much for providing us with your financial support while we completed our internships. The funding provided all of us with the opportunity to focus on our tasks and make the most of our ten weeks without having to worry about external financial factors. My fellow classmates and I are very thankful to be in such fortunate positions.

This past summer, I interned at LAF, the Legal Assistance Foundation, in downtown Chicago. The organization has several areas where they serve clients, ranging from family law, housing, immigration, and consumer matters. I worked exclusively in LAF's Consumer Practice group where I primarily served indigent senior clients from the Chicagoland area with matters such as mortgage foreclosure, repair scams, unfair debt collection, and bankruptcy. My main objectives involved conducting intake with prospective clients, where I asked questions related to the legal problem that they were facing, drafting necessary documents for litigation, such as affidavits or motions, and researching difficult legal questions and preparing memoranda. Moreover, I would also present findings and update attorneys and interns at weekly case acceptance meetings on cases I was staffed on.

Of all of my assigned tasks, client intake was my favorite to conduct as well as the most rewarding. The clients I interviewed were gracious and patient with sensitive information. Furthermore, I was also fortunate that I was able to develop a professional vocabulary in Spanish, given the large volume of Latino clientele who seek out LAF's services. Having that one-on-one connection reassured the main reason I attended law school in the first place: to help assist and guide people through difficult circumstances and arrive at the best possible solution.

Working at a non-profit, pro bono legal aid organization, such as LAF, where the attorneys work more with less meant that several of the clients that I conducted intake with could not be taken on with their cases. For example, it is often the case that LAF will assist clients who wish to file for Chapter 7 or Chapter 13 bankruptcy only if the amount of money owed is substantial. Several clients were unable to maintain monthly utility payments, which often resulted in one of their utility services shut off. The amount owed on a given unpaid utility bill would be high, but not nearly enough to justify the bankruptcy filing – a powerful tool that can only be used once every seven years. Despite this, one of my favorite cases this summer involved a client who was able to avoid this hurdle with our assistance.

We are taught in law school, at least under the law and economics lens, that if the legal rule can be avoided through bargaining or alternative means, that is a preferable route to serve clients. It

saves money, time, and anxiety. In the case of one indigent Latino client, that is exactly what we advised. He had faced a shut-off by the local gas company. Given his diabetic condition, it was important that the situation be alleviated before any further harm. Our client faced a bill that was below LAF's threshold, which meant that it would take some creativity to come up with a solution that would allow for him to keep a roof over his head while at the same time having the gas service back on for his needs. His income was derived solely from Social Security. This meant that no viable alternative existed to pay off the relatively high gas bill.

Fortunately, working with a local senior citizen housing organization, our client was able to relocate to a building that would not only be more inexpensive than his current housing situation, but also cover the gas payments. Because Social Security benefits may not be garnished, our client now simply must pay whatever he owes towards his current debt. He has gas service and is able to live without worrying about future utility shutoffs. Finding new accommodation, instead of having to file for formal Chapter 7 bankruptcy, was the best solution at a low cost.

Beyond that matter, it was rare for me to see anything go all the way to the end from filing the complaint to judgment entered. There was one client that I was able to see receive default judgment shortly after I arrived at LAF. The client had entered into an agreement to loan her former husband a large sum of money to maintain payments on an apartment building he inherited from his mother on the South Side. The agreement included six percent interest to be paid yearly over a three-year period. After attempting to collect on various occasions, and her husband giving no response whatsoever, she turned to LAF to help file a complaint for breach of contract. I helped draft the affidavit and motion for default judgment that would eventually be filed in court. Our client will soon collect what is rightfully hers after years of patiently waiting.

My summer at LAF was incredibly challenging, rewarding, and beneficial. While the coursework I took over the course of my first year at University of Chicago helped with taking on substantive legal research and writing projects, the learning curve presented by interpreting local statutes and applying them to real-life situations will be something I appreciate and look back on in my remaining time in law school and my career as an attorney.

Working in the public interest was the best decision I could have made with how I spent my summer. The work at legal aid offices is robust and encourages volunteers to take part in substantive roles. Had I worked elsewhere, I am uncertain I would have received the same amount of client contact, early responsibility to manage given cases, or opportunity to work with and for experienced and savvy attorneys. While I continue to advance in my legal education, it is my intention to retain actively involved in serving the public interest by partaking in more pro bono work with LAF. I am very appreciative to Equal Justice America for financing public interest students' summer internships. Thank you for providing the monetary assistance to spend my summer at an organization that endures as such an important resource for thousands of Chicagoans.

Sincerely,

Peter Dalmasy
J.D. Candidate, 2017
The University of Chicago Law School