

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My time at the Equal Justice Center was truly a life-changing experience. Not only did the attorneys at the Equal Justice Center dedicate significant time to educating myself and other interns on the hardships facing the low-wage worker and immigrant populations, they also made sure we got plenty of hands-on experience to combat these issues.

At the Equal Justice Center, interns are put on teams of two and assigned cases. The primary objective of the Equal Justice Center is to protect and enforce the rights of low-wage workers, so the cases we saw involved exploitation of workers in some way: either workers were not paid fair wages or any wages at all; not paid overtime; or were promised certain things that were never realized. Because many of the EJC's clients are legal permanent residents, immigrants, or guest workers, they are especially vulnerable to exploitation because often members of these groups do not speak fluent English, do not know their employment rights, fear retaliation, or simply do not know how to access the justice system.

As an intern, most of my time was spent working on two cases. One involved twenty construction workers who labored on a construction project for several weeks under a sub-contractor. Rather than paying them, the sub-contractor took the money they were paid by the contractor and never paid any of the workers. The workers were unable to find the sub-contractor to demand payment. I assisted in filing documents for a mechanics' lien on the property. Fortunately, through extensive communication with the attorney for the contractor, we were able to settle the case before ever having to file lien documents. We were able to convince the contractor to recognize and acknowledge our clients' claims, and receive payment in full. In the end, each client received a check for the work they had performed.

I also worked on a case involving five men who worked in a restaurant as kitchen staff, and were continually required to work excessive overtime hours with no overtime compensation; the workers were also paid below minimum wage. Though this case was still in progress by the time I left the internship, I was able to work on writing a Motion for Summary Judgment to get several issues decided in our clients' favor.

Both of these cases were extremely meaningful to me. For each case, I met with the clients involved to discuss their situations. The gratitude they showed us was remarkable, and very moving. Being able to hand over payment to our clients in the construction case that the men had depended on but did not think they would get was a wonderful opportunity for me to appreciate the importance of recognizing the rights of each individual, and helping them to enforce those rights. I also gained from the restaurant case a sense of the empowerment that individuals get once they have been informed of their rights, and realize that they have access to justice where they previously thought they did not.

I am truly grateful for having had the opportunity to work at the Equal Justice Center, and grateful to Equal Justice America for helping to fund my internship.

Thank you,

Veronica Portillo  
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