

August 30, 2018

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I write to reflect on my summer experience and thank Equal Justice America for the support that made it feasible for me to pursue work that I am passionate about. I spent my summer working at Community Legal Services (CLS) in Philadelphia, PA. I worked in the two medical legal partnerships (MLP) that CLS has established with healthcare partners in Philadelphia. MLPs are an exciting legal services model in which a legal aid provider partners with a healthcare provider to serve its patient population. The healthcare provider is charged with screening its patients for legal issues and referring them to the legal aid partner. This model seeks to address the fact that one's health is impacted by their environment and social factors, and so collaborating with a lawyer can actually lead to better health outcomes.

CLS has two MLPs. One is with a federally qualified health clinic in Northeast Philadelphia, and the other is with a pediatric primary care practice in West Philadelphia run by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. My supervising attorney has offices at both of these healthcare sites, and spends time each week working from those offices. The MLP model seems to work best when a lawyer is on-site at the healthcare practice to connect with the patient when they are there for their appointment and screened by their provider. MLPs are a great way to connect with clients that a legal aid organization may not otherwise be reaching by embedding a lawyer in the client's community, and facilitating their connection to legal services so that the client is not responsible for affirmatively seeking help.

This summer I mostly worked on cases at the West Philadelphia MLP pediatric provider site. This practice serves around 30,000 patients, and the MLP just began in April. It was really exciting to be working in a project that was in such a preliminary stage, because I got a lot of insight into all that goes into creating a successful MLP and implementing it, and the challenges that are unique to providing legal services in this non-traditional setting.

At this MLP, the doctors refer patients with legal issues to the practice's social work staff, who make the formal connection to CLS through a screening tool. It was my job to make the initial outreach to clients who were referred to us at this site. As I became more familiar with the legal issues our clients were presenting I got better about asking relevant questions and getting all of the information we would need to determine how to proceed in assisting the client. Those skills will absolutely serve me well in direct service work I do in the future.

There were two legal issues that we encountered over and over at this site. The first were families with housing conditions issues. Many families who were referred to us were in subsidized or section 8 housing and having serious problems with their home that landlords simply refused to repair. A lot of families were dealing with significant leaks and water damage but were unable to make landlords repair and remediate the damage. One family had such significant water damage that there were mushrooms sprouting up from the carpet in their living room. Unfortunately, the law in Pennsylvania is not very helpful for people in these circumstances. We provided a lot of advice to these families about their options, including filing a complaint with the Fair Housing Commission.

The other issue that I saw over and over this summer were families facing utility shutoffs. In Pennsylvania utility companies are forbidden from shutting off utilities during the winter to protect families from going without heat, but they are permitted to issue shutoffs in the summer. There were several brutal heatwaves this summer, and I cannot imagine what it would be like to endure one without electricity and air conditioning. I helped with one case in which our client filed for bankruptcy to discharge her debt to the electric company and avoid shutoff. I learned that in Pennsylvania, low-income customers can be expected to pay up to 17% of their monthly income towards utility bills, whereas the average non-low-income customer is expected to pay an average of just 3.2%. I got to engage in some advocacy related to the state's plan for a program that provides grants to low-income utility customers facing shutoffs, which was something I knew very little about before this summer. I was shocked to learn about the enormous financial burden that utilities place on low-income families in relation to their incomes.

I also got to work on some public benefits cases, which I really enjoyed. In Pennsylvania, individuals who are undocumented do not qualify for state-funded healthcare except in an emergency. There is a program called Emergency Medical Assistance (EMA) that will provide healthcare to an undocumented individual if that person meets the eligibility criteria. The state is strict in administering this program, and has a narrow definition of what it means to be an emergency. This summer I was able to advocate for a client who was denied EMA despite being diagnosed with cancer and providing documentation that his doctor recommended surgery. I wrote an advocacy letter to the local welfare office and they granted our client coverage for several months in order to undergo the cancer treatment he needed.

I had a great summer at CLS. They provided a wonderful internship program that was packed with great work and exciting programming. Though I was doing MLP work, I learned a lot about what other units at CLS are doing which was really exciting. Moving forward I am working with a legal services provider to develop a MLP with a pediatric healthcare provider, similar to the one I worked in this summer at CLS. The experience at CLS was indispensable in preparing me to do this work in the future. I left my summer at CLS feeling committed to a career in public interest and excited about the work I was able to do. I am grateful to EJA for making it possible to commit to public interest work.

Sincerely,

Abigail Samuels
Penn Law Class of 2019



August 20, 2018

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am an attorney at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS). This summer, I had the pleasure of supervising Abigail Samuels during her summer internship with CLS. This letter serves as the Supervisor Evaluation for Abigail for her Equal Justice America Fellowship.

Abigail interned in CLS's Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) program this summer. Abigail primarily worked with our new MLP at a pediatric primary care center in West Philadelphia. For that partnership, Abigail was responsible for doing all initial outreach to patient families referred to us. Abigail called new referrals weekly, gathered all pertinent information about their legal problems, and worked with me to determine whether or not to open a case for the family.

In addition to her work onboarding new MLP clients, Abigail managed an entire caseload of her own. Most of Abigail's cases were clients in our MLP practice. Abigail handled 20 cases over the summer, representing clients in public benefits, utilities, and housing matters. Abigail excelled in her casework, successfully advocating for her clients to gain access to important benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps, as well as essential utilities such as electric, heat, and water. Many of Abigail's MLP clients had disabled children in the household, so maintaining access to safe, stable housing and stable income was literally a life or death situation for these families.

Abigail also jumped right into CLS's systemic advocacy during her summer. Abigail helped to draft CLS's comments to the Low-Income Heating Assistance Program (LIHEAP) state plan. Additionally, Abigail did work in other CLS units, jumping in to volunteer at CLS's summer expungement clinics.

Overall, Abigail did fantastic work this summer. She was managed multiple assignments with maturity and efficiency. And finally, Abigail was a pleasure to work with. We truly enjoyed having her on the team this summer. Please do not hesitate to contact me with further questions about Abigail.

Sincerely,

Lydia R. Gottesfeld