

August 29, 2012

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Rd.
Building II, Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you for giving me the means to support myself this summer while working with the incredible team of advocates on the Welfare Law Unit (WLU) of Greater Boston Legal Services. I have come away from the experience with a better understanding of the ways in which complex bureaucracies serve to exclude and confuse low-income families, limiting their access to services to which they are entitled. I see this as the principal reason that we need legal services, and I spent my summer learning how to be an ally for poor single mothers without asserting my authority over them as a person of privilege. I will continue to strive for that delicate balance.

The average WLU client is accustomed to being asked to verify her income, family composition, and immigration status with regularity, and understands that these and other “verifications,” as they are called, will in some way determine her eligibility to receive food stamps, or cash assistance, or some other benefit. However, she is not usually privy to the interacting sets of regulations governing eligibility, and unless she is a quite savvy and experienced client of welfare programs, may not know when an eligibility determination is made in error, or how to contest it. Those who sense something went wrong contact the WLU to ask for help figuring out why their benefits were denied, lowered, or terminated.

This is the baseline context for legal services work. This summer, I had the good fortune of working with a supervising attorney with ten years’ worth of ongoing client relationships, and could often seize upon the foundation of trust she had long worked to build. Upon referral, it is up to the legal services attorney to ascertain what the client believes is wrong, and using her knowledge of eligibility regulations, to gather those facts about the client and her family which are relevant to the issue. Critically, the lawyer must not treat the interview as a mere fact-finding mission, but also as an opportunity to educate the client on eligibility rules and present her with her rights and options. As a member of the legal profession, the attorney must consider the authority and power dynamic inherent to the client/attorney relationship, with the awareness that she runs the risk of becoming just one more authority figure making demands on the client’s life. She must refrain from *telling* the client how to proceed—as so many others in positions of authority have done—and instead should provide the client with all the information necessary to make an informed decision of her own. In this way, the advocate distinguishes herself from the myriad social services workers and government agents who the client perceived to be working “against” her, or not “on her side.”

I worked most closely with Ms. O., a longtime client of my supervisor’s. During the two months I’d known her, the single mother of six children, ages 9 months to 8 years, had been evicted from her apartment and forced to rent a storage unit for all the family’s belongings while the seven of them were placed in a single motel room by the housing department, which had run out of shelter beds. I worked tirelessly to coordinate new subsidized childcare for Ms. O. after she was placed in shelter and subsequently lost her job, and I triumphed after nearly two months when I found enough slots for all her children as well as transportation to and from daycare. However, towards the end of my internship, I was forced to tell Ms. O. that DTA had denied her replacement food stamp benefits to substitute groceries lost when her refrigerator broke,

because she had failed to report the outage within the required ten days. As compelling as I found Ms. O.'s circumstances to be, the limits to what I could accomplish to assist her were clear; learning which rules can be pushed or expanded and which cannot is an essential part of working in legal services.

Obviously, I could not take advantage of my supervisor's relationship with clients in all cases. One undocumented mother of two citizen children, Ms. V., was referred to our unit for the first time by a social worker concerned that the family could not afford food. When I called her to conduct an intake, it became apparent that she had no problem with her benefits case—in fact, she did not have any benefits case at all, because she was afraid that she would risk deportation if she applied for food stamps on behalf of her children. Understandably, immigrants are not always certain of the extent to which state agencies are in communication with immigration authorities, or whether they share data and when. For undocumented individuals, any contact with government may seem to pose a legitimate threat. I was acutely aware of my position of privilege as I counseled Ms. V. regarding her right to apply for food stamps for her eligible children. Yet I wondered how effective my reassurances could be for her, considering my own status as white, citizen, presumptive member of the legal profession—as someone who will never face such fears. I came to accept that the decision to apply lies with Ms. V. herself, and the most I could do was tell her what her legal rights are and hope she acted on them how she saw fit.

For a variety of reasons, my clients did not always do the thing that seemed, to me, most prudent, or in their best interest. But my role was to educate, empower, and act as my client's agent—never to paternalistically direct her conduct or attempt to influence her choices. Part of learning to work with clients means learning to accept their choices and advocate for outcome they desire, resisting any temptation to chastise them for acting in ways that conflict with what my own choices might be.

Single moms on welfare are constantly being told what to do, how to do it, and when; what they need in an advocate is someone to ask them what *they themselves* want and need, who will follow through in helping to execute their own decisions. I believe more strongly than ever that these heads of households can and should be trusted to know what is best for themselves and their families. Though the idea that poor mothers on welfare possess agency can seem radical in today's political climate, I am proud to have done a little bit to help these moms surmount bureaucratic barriers in the service of promoting their education, agency, and self-determination.

Once again, I thank you genuinely for supporting my efforts and those of the WLU.

Sincerely,

Jess Cochrane

Northeastern University School of Law



GREATER BOSTON
LEGAL SERVICES
...and justice for all

August 28, 2012

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Re: Internship Evaluation for Jess Cochrane

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Jess Cochrane completed an internship under my supervision with the Welfare Law Unit (WLU) at Greater Boston Legal Services from May 29 – August 17, 2012. She was a wonderful asset to the WLU this summer.

Jess assisted in the day-to-day handling of WLU cases, including extensive interaction with clients in English and Spanish; investigating case information and negotiating with staff at the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), Child Care Choices of Boston, and the Social Security Administration; researching DTA and child care regulations and policy; drafting correspondence with both clients and agencies; identifying resources to help address vulnerable clients' additional needs; and engaging in grassroots lobbying by reaching out to clients to inform them about issues in the state budget that are likely to affect them. Jess also performed research to inform a systemic advocacy effort by the WLU regarding DTA's adding new babies onto clients' benefits.

Jess's excellent analytical and advocacy skills were clearly demonstrated in her parsing of complex regulations in the course of analyzing our clients' cases, internal discussion of case strategy, and informal negotiations with staff at several government agencies. She also demonstrated strong and thorough research skills, e.g., when asked to find regulations and sub-regulatory material relevant to WLU advocacy projects.

Jess was extremely diligent in every task she undertook. She enthusiastically dove into each assignment and was very thorough, often taking the initiative to identify and perform further legal research or case investigation on behalf of our clients. In addition to her excellent advocacy skills, she exhibited tremendous compassion and commitment to serving our low-income clients, including some who were very challenging to serve.

Thank you for helping fund Jess's internship with us. Please feel free to contact me at (617) 603-1621 with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Naomi M" with a long, sweeping underline.

Naomi Meyer
Senior Attorney
Welfare Law Unit