

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
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13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to you and Equal Justice America for funding this opportunity for me. I had an amazing time with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Petersburg, and it would not have been possible for me without the financial support that my fellowship provided. Working in a small office in an underserved community offered the chance to really gain valuable direct client service experience and exposure to the myriad effects that poverty has on our client population.

Working with the Petersburg office provided the opportunity to do more than just casework, although that was definitely our focus. In fact, I found that the non-case work parts of the position served to distinctly further and deepen my experience. Handling intake and engaging in community outreach with our organizer put a more direct and varied face on the situation facing many of our clients. It was particularly heartbreaking when I would answer the phone, hear someone on the other end desperate for help, and realize that I was going to have to turn them away, due to subject matter or geographic and income restrictions. It brought home the point that, despite our best efforts, there is more need in these communities than help available.

On the other hand, the clients whom we could help, and whom I would then interview for our intake process, really made me feel like I was doing something valuable right from the beginning of the case. They were so frequently relieved or excited just to have someone willing to listen to their story, and the stories were all unique.

We had the chance to see cases from beginning to end, and I really appreciated the look at the whole life cycle of the legal aid process. Sitting in on case review and hearing the lawyers debate whether to take a case was often the most interesting part of the week. They would brainstorm potential issues, problems, and solutions before either volunteering to take a case or letting us step up to take the first crack at it. It was great to get a sense of the ebb and flow of incoming work, and to see how the lawyers would approach new problems.

With my fellow intern, we handled a case start to finish for a client who came in during our first week at the office. She had purchased a car from a used car dealer in the community who appears to prey upon low-income individuals. We were able to research the various claims that she had against him for his various breaches of consumer laws, consult with the attorneys in the office, and eventually reach a settlement with the dealer that made the client whole. For a case that our supervisors gave us as one to look into with no serious prospect of success, we were very pleased with the outcome. More importantly for the future, we were able to provide our client with some education regarding her rights and the protections in place for consumers,

which should enable her to be a better consumer in the future.

My favorite experience of the summer was the unemployment appeal that I got to argue during my last month at LAJC. A lawyer who had left the office had handled the deputy determination, which we won, and the employer appealed. The client was confused by the process, and initially said he did not need representation for his appeal, only to ask for help the week before the date of his appeal. Our managing attorney, who would have handled it, was going to be out of the office, so I offered to handle it myself. She gave me the file and the weekend to bring myself up to speed with the case, and arranged for an attorney in Richmond to sit in with me for the hearing. I was able to examine the witness, deliver my closing argument, and won the case for my client. It was nerve-wracking before the hearing, when I was walking him again through the process we were about to go through. It hit home that I was going to be the sole oral advocate for my client. His job had been a good one, paying him well, until he had been unfairly terminated, and he needed the money from his unemployment. This was a big deal, and he trusted me to help him through the process. That was an incredible feeling, and I felt very honored.

The rest of the experiences from my summer were all valuable. We worked with our community organizer, and had the chance to help with a local community group called Pathways, trying to convince the local school board to hold community engagement sessions. I got to deal with the bureaucracy of the Social Security administration and the Virginia Employment Commission on behalf of my clients. I attended a meeting of the Virginia Consumer Task Force, and training with the Consumer Tax Law Project. We went on the radio for our community organizer, and I tabled at a community fair. Also, of course, I was able to help on a number of other cases either as the principle handling a smaller issue or doing research for an attorney handling the matter. We were never bored, and always learning something new.

Thank you again for this opportunity. This fellowship meant a great deal to me. Even if I do not remain in legal services, I know that it has changed my outlook for the better and given me a much more vivid perspective on poverty in America.

Sincerely,
Kristin E. Russell
University of Virginia