

July 28, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben

Thanks to the fellowship I received from Equal Justice America, I was able to intern at the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) in Charlottesville, Virginia. The internship began on May 19 and when I finished on July 29, I had logged over 400 hours in the service of the low-income clients that qualify for LAJC's legal services. I worked for the Civil Advocacy Program (CAP) under supervising attorneys, John Conover and Brenda Castañeda, on housing and consumer law cases. Under CAP our cases sought to keep a family from being evicted, losing housing assistance support, or being unfairly treated by a landlord. I also performed intake for LAJC's Children's Health Advocacy Program (CHAP). CHAP is a collaboration with the UVA Medical Center to provide legal services to families of children seen at UVA's facility. These legal issues may be related to benefits, educational needs, or housing, but they are not tort-related.

As mentioned, my primary focus was to provide – with supervision – legal services to clients with complaints pertaining to housing and consumer law. It started easy. My first client had overpaid on her rent due to a housing authority processing error. I was able to resolve the matter in her favor with two phone calls. They were not all so easy, however. I learned quickly the importance of proper notice and procedure and used this knowledge to maintain a family in their home for an additional month rather than face eviction within days. While the difference between 3 and 30 days may not seem to be a great victory, it provided an opportunity for that family to remove to a new home on their own terms instead of abandoning property and settling for unsatisfactory living conditions.

While the LAJC does not provide family law or tort liability claim resources, it is a wide-service firm that covers child advocacy, elder law, benefits, immigrant advocacy, prisoner rights, and mental health law. I had the opportunity to extend my internship to some of these other fields. I was able to help two families regain Medicaid services for their permanently disabled children after benefits had been wrongfully terminated. I helped a paraplegic man challenge his home health equipment provider to obtain medically appropriate equipment after they had provided him with a mobility device that consistently tipped over with him in it. These were worthy clients and I was grateful to be in a position in which I could make a positive difference in their lives.

Many times, legal issues cannot be neatly separated. I worked with a formerly homeless woman with a mental diagnosis who had lost her public assistance and was served with an unlawful detainer by her landlord, demanding that she and her 4-year-old daughter leave their

residence. She was behind on her rent and her utilities were shut off. While I researched housing-tenant law and studied the obligations of HUD-funded assistance, it was efforts to communicate between people that allowed for a breakthrough. After many phone calls and careful communication between all of the parties involved, an agreement was negotiated; our client regained her housing assistance and the landlord non-suited on his claim of unlawful detainer.

It is not all roses, of course. Some staff attorneys grimace when they recognize the names of perpetual clients when a case is opened. I winced at least once – notably, after a client refused to let us speak with her housing coordinator for fear of administrative retribution the next time she sought to transfer her assistance voucher. Sometimes there is very little that can be done to help a client out of a legal bind, but you still do what you are able.

It is not apparent from what I have written above, but I also researched and wrote memos and prepared PowerPoint presentations. Some of the topics I researched included mobile home park closure procedures, the application of current rents as to past and current rent, and the effects of Virginia's new mental health legislation on temporary detention orders. These tasks, in fact, were no less important than the client advocacy, because there was a direct connection between the questions presented in hypothetical and the answers needed in practice.

I thoroughly enjoyed working at the Legal Aid Justice Center under the supervision of several extraordinary lawyers. Without the assistance of Equal Justice America, it would not have been possible. Thank you.

Sincerely,

KYLE WAMSTAD  
University of Virginia Law School  
*J.D. expected 2010*