

8/30/2016

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Dan Ruben:

This summer I interned at Columbia Legal Services in Seattle, WA. Columbia Legal Services (“CLS”) is a Washington non-profit organization that receives no federal funding. We frequently represent people that are unable to receive legal aid from federally funded organizations, such as undocumented individuals, people convicted of felonies and individuals in class action lawsuits.

There are several project groups within CLS. I worked with the Economic Justice Project with four attorneys and one legal aid. Over the course of the summer I was able to work on a variety of projects that the Economic Justice Project was involved with. I started my summer working on a campaign to end Seattle’s practice of seizing and destroying the property of homeless individuals without due process. I did this under the supervision of Yuriy Rudensky. I also worked on a project to end the practice of unfair debt collection acts against low-income individuals. We worked with individuals that had accrued substantial medical debt after visiting hospitals without insurance or with insurance that did not cover the full extent of charges. Many of these individuals qualified for free medical care under Washington’s Charity Care Act but were not informed of the application for charity care or assessed by hospitals. Others were not provided information or materials in Spanish despite a statutory requirement that charity care information be provided in both English and Spanish. Their accounts were instead turned over to debt collectors, their wages garnished and their credit destroyed. Our organization worked to apply for charity care retroactively and to get an injunction preventing debt collectors from collecting on accounts and to insure that hospitals in the Seattle area assess patients for charity care.

In addition to Charity Care, I also worked on a student debt project over the summer. This project was dedicated to helping low-income individuals in Washington State that had attended for-profit schools. These students were frequently persuaded to enroll in institutions through misrepresentations of student graduation rates, job placement and instructor qualifications. They frequently had student debt that was both federal and the result of private loans. These loans constituted a substantial burden when compared to their income and no enhanced job prospects as a result of their education. In addition, they were frequently nontraditional students with a disproportionate number of elderly individuals, military veterans, and low-income individuals. CLS worked to change the existing laws surrounding for-profit schools and to get relief for individuals that has accumulated a hazardous amount of debt.

My work at Columbia Legal Services over the summer helping low-income individuals was very meaningful to me because of my own personal experiences with the issues that afflict low-income families. Throughout my life, I have received the goodwill and aid of many organizations and individuals. Now that I am older, I believe that my legal education is an invaluable tool that I can use to help amplify the voice of other underrepresented individuals. Working at CLS was a fantastic opportunity for me. It solidified my resolve to go into public interest and was a fantastic opportunity to see passionate, selfless and dedicated attorneys that were working daily to insure that all people, regardless of race, gender and income, had advocates in the legal realm. It would not have been possible for me to work if it were not for the generous fellowship that I was given by Equal Justice America.

Thank you for your support and for all of the positive change that Equal Justice America makes possible. The fellowships available to law students make it possible for us to pursue careers in public interest and bring us all one step closer to eradicating poverty.

Respectfully,

Kate Rochat
Notre Dame Law School