

August 31, 2016

Dan Ruben

Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia, 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Before working at the Legal Aid Justice Center, I had worked exclusively for corporations, either directly or for a law firm with an exclusively corporate clientele. Needless to say, I was very excited to have had the opportunity to dive into something so incredibly rewarding and completely different. Those differences taught me a few important things.

When it came to my clients, the first thing I noticed was that their legal problems hit close to home. With a corporate client, no matter how serious the problem is, it is still several degrees removed from any one individual. My clients' legal problems were deeply personal, often with potentially catastrophic consequences. Several of my clients were on the verge of losing their housing, and a few of them really had no place to go, especially if they were also in danger of losing their housing assistance. For them, the alternative to their current housing was literally the street. The only thing more sobering than being entrusted with such problems was the realization that in many instances there was not very much that we could do.

It bothers me that the deck seems to be stacked against my clients. If I do something that irritates my landlord, I can expect an unpleasant phone call or email. Many of my clients who live in public housing or housing that is eligible for housing assistance can expect an eviction notice. One of my clients was a single mother with medical debt. Rather than giving her the financial assistance to which she was entitled, the hospital opted to garnish her wages. When she objected and offered to set up a payment plan, they responded with a lawsuit. Because of the high cost of legal services and housing, another one of my clients had lived with and remained legally married to her ex-husband, landing her with an enormous bill and then a lawsuit after he went to the hospital with heart failure. Whether dealing with rapacious debt collectors or employers who withhold wages, many of my clients are constantly mistreated by people who assume (often correctly, unfortunately), that they don't have the resources to fight back, or are too beaten down to be inclined to do so. As nice as it was to participate in making a difference, it is clear to me that deep systemic change is necessary to end the cycle of poverty.

Finally, I would like to make a plug for the Legal Aid Justice Center. The help that they provide to their clients does not end at the door to the courthouse. They are deeply involved in the community both by advocating for change directly and, more importantly, teaching community members to organize and empower themselves so that they can work toward the goals that are most important for them. I am grateful for the privilege of spending my summer with a group of people who are able to accomplish so much for incredible cause, and unlike their counterparts in private practice, do what they do without the luxury of paralegals, legal secretaries, and an army of associates.

Thank you very much for providing me with the EJA fellowship this past summer. It was truly a phenomenal experience.

Sincerely,

/Trevor Topf/

Trevor Topf

JD Candidate, Class of 2018

University of Virginia School of Law