

September 14, 2022

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

Dear Dan Ruben:

This summer I had the absolute pleasure of working within the Legal Aid Society's Criminal Appeals Bureau. In that capacity, I had the opportunity to write two briefs on behalf of two separate clients, Amanda\* and Frank\*. Amanda was just sixteen years old when she was charged with obstructing arrest by keeping a knife entrusted to her by an adult in her life without the knowledge that it had been used in the commission of a crime. Despite being adjudicated a youthful offender – a vacatur of conviction – Amanda was assessed almost \$400 in surcharges and fees. I had the opportunity to meet and converse with Amanda and to hear about the incredible toll that amount of debt can take on the life of a 16-year-old with little to no financial support from her family and no stable source of income. In response to her circumstances, I was able to write and file a motion challenging those surcharges. Arguing based on a recent amendment to the New York Criminal Procedure Law Code, we pointed out the hardship imposed by the surcharges and concluded that they ought to be waived in the interest of justice.

In Frank's case, I was tasked with writing a brief arguing for him to be re-adjudicated as a lower risk-level sex offender. The legal issue was quite interesting – we argued on the basis of social scientific about cognition and brain development that a risk assessment of a young person cannot accurately account for their risk later on as a more grown and developed adult. More significant than the legal issue to me, however, was the kind of advocacy I was able to do. Those convicted of sex offenses in many cases represent the exception to liberal views on criminal justice e.g. "I don't think prisons are very socially productive, but I don't care if rapists rot." Having the opportunity to meet and work with someone in this group gave me a firsthand perspective on the kind of stigma they face, and caused me to have to ask hard questions of myself in an attempt to square my general beliefs with the nuances of the situation in which I found myself working. I found this to be challenging and satisfying.

In general, my experience at Legal Aid showed me how meaningful and valuable direct service work can be. The summer informed what I think will be a life-long commitment to public service and was enabled in part by EJA's funding, for which I am very grateful.

Evan Engel  
Stanford Law School