

HELEN SONG

October 27, 2022

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
dan@equaljusticeamerica.org

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This past summer, I worked at Bay Area Legal Aid as a summer law clerk for the San Francisco Economic Justice Project & Individualized Legal Support Services team. I had an incredible experience helping clients secure and preserve their public benefits. I had opportunities to improve my legal research and drafting skills, as well as my client communication skills through interviews, testimony preparation, and potential client intake. I also represented clients at administrative hearings, gaining oral argument experience.

Before this summer, I did not have any significant knowledge regarding public benefits, economic justice work, or administrative law generally. However, I dived right into learning about the California indigent aid system through my assignment, where I helped draft and edit a writ petition for a client whose cash assistance benefits had been wrongfully terminated based on an incorrect accusation of fraud. Through this writ petition, I learned about California's general assistance (CAAP) program and how it worked. I also learned about what writ petitions are and how they are filed in administrative court. This experience overall helped me understand the complexities of administrative law and the importance of challenging decisions.

I also had two of my own cases where I directly worked with clients and represented them. For the first one, I drafted a statement of position brief to submit for an administrative hearing where I crafted arguments and provided evidence as to why our client's food stamps had been incorrectly discontinued. I also prepared the client for testimony, and I asked her questions during an administrative hearing to get her testimony. This was my first time speaking at a hearing, and the experience helped me build confidence in my oral argument and litigation skills.

The case I spent the most time on over the whole summer was a case where our client was being accused of being a "fleeing felon," and thus had been denied cash assistance. I spent hours researching the various definitions of a "fleeing felon" from state law, county ordinances, and local agency policies and investigating our client's criminal warrants from the past ten years, which is when his alleged "fleeing felon" charge was from. All the while, I was constantly communicating with our client as to what our best plan of action was while always giving him the opportunity to ask questions, give his opinions, and raise concerns. This helped me learn how to balance several tasks at once. It also was a lesson in knowing how to present information to a client so that they always fully understand what is going on and can make informed decisions.

For this case, I also learned a great deal about oral advocacy. The administrative hearing was unfortunately heard by a somewhat difficult judge who aggressively interrupted my questioning and prevented me from getting testimony on the crucial question of why our client had left the jurisdiction that issued the warrant. The judge also demanded I answer very difficult questions, and even laughed at me when I asked for clarification. Despite these obstacles, I managed to comply with the judge's demands while making certain to get those orders explicitly on the record for appeal, noting my objections to each. Through this, I learned the importance of thinking quickly on my feet, especially in litigation settings. I also learned how important it is to be well-prepared as that helped me to navigate this challenging hearing.

Although we did not receive the positive decision we hoped for after this hearing, we were able to negotiate for my client to receive the cash assistance he was initially denied upon reapplication. I was also able to make sure that any and all issues that could come up during an appeal was on the record of the hearing despite the judge having aggressively stopped me from asking essential questions. This was a lesson in exploring all the different avenues of advocacy for a client as I was still able to secure assistance for my client despite a negative decision.

Beyond legal skills, I learned this summer how important services are for indigent clients who need to fight for public benefits to survive. Especially as the cost of living skyrockets in San Francisco and other cities around the country, it is essential that the government provide assistance to those who suffer the most, and it is attorneys who need to ensure that people receive that assistance.

I also saw firsthand how so many people face unending cycles of poverty, homelessness, lack of healthcare access, and incarceration. My experiences made me realize that being an effective public interest lawyer requires constant learning and flexibility to help clients break out of those cycles. However, I realized from working with non-attorney advocates as well that solving these issues requires a whole community of dedicated advocates, lawyers, and organizers. I am so thankful to all the different people I learned from and received help from this summer, and I hope to join this community to be able to uplift and assist more people.

Sincerely,

Helen Song
University of Virginia Law School