

August 17, 2017

Dan Ruben  
Equal Justice America  
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13540 East Boundary Road  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you so much for support from Equal Justice America (EJA) for my summer internship with the Employment Law unit of Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS). When I reflect on my summer, there are several themes which I would like to share with you.

The Employment Law Unit at GBLS includes a low-income taxpayer clinic, a wage theft litigation docket, and a major focus on the state's unemployment insurance program. I was fortunate to receive assignments in all of these areas. However, my main focus was on representing individuals at informal administrative hearings at the Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) to appeal the denial of, or defend a determination of eligibility for, unemployment insurance benefits through the state of Massachusetts. Over the course of eleven weeks, I had the privilege of representing five individuals in hearings at three different DUA offices around the state, including in two small cities north of Boston: Lawrence, Massachusetts and Lowell, Massachusetts.

*Workplace Injustices and Intersections with the Criminal (In)justice System*

The clients I worked with comprise a diverse snapshot of working people in the greater Boston area: I represented a single woman with a graduate degree from an Ivy League institution, a Jamaican father who worked as a school bus driver, a nurse who was the breadwinner for her family and has a disabled child, a senior-aged former federal felon, and a young, gay, man my own age, who has overcome intellectual disability and mental health challenges in adulthood. Each of these individuals shared their experiences and perspectives with me and gave me insight into the complicated and often unjust dynamics faced by working people in employment environments, far beyond the denial of unemployment insurance. They also repeatedly broke down any possible stereotypes or preconceived notions I might have had about "legal services clients": many were well-educated and all became my collaborator, more than my "client", as we discussed strategy, considered the likely arguments from the employer, and prepared for the hearing.

None of these workers were members of labor union, and had they been, all of them would have benefited from the protections associated with a union. My interest in workers' struggles has been heightened as a result of my internship summer, and I continue to envision a future as a labor and employment attorney.

However, a new legal practice area also captured my attention as a result of my summer with GBLS. Three of the five individuals I worked with found that prior contact with the

criminal (in)justice system created a complication for collecting unemployment benefits, even where time was already served, charges were completely dismissed, or records were completely sealed. The spillover consequences of this contact with the criminal (in)justice system for working people was deeply disturbing to me. The opportunity to zealously advocate for people affected by this system and to ensure that these consequences were mitigated as fully as the law would allow, was challenging and energizing. It has also lead me to contemplate criminal defense work, something I had not previously envisioned exploring.

*The Role of the Social Safety Net in Advancing Individual Autonomy and Self-Determination*

While the hearings at the DUA are informal, they are still adversarial, and as the claimant's representative, I was responsible for interviewing the client, gathering and organizing the relevant facts, and developing a legal theory under which my client and I would proceed. My clients and I worked together so that they felt prepared to testify under direct examination and cross examination about their own experiences at work. I so enjoyed the practice of crafting a case and owning the process from preparation to outcome. As I have reflected on my work this summer, I realize that I also relished the straightforward aspect of each case. Once we determined the legal theory or theories under which the client was eligible, it was enormously satisfying to move full steam ahead, knowing that I was advocating for an individual who had worked hard, been separated from their employment, and needed the state's safety net to kick in and help them out. It was also surprisingly satisfying to have, for lack of a better word, a clear opponent. In general, my understanding of inequality and poverty in this country is structural: there are major institutional forces at play that keep poor people down and allow the rich to flourish. These are *systems* that need to be torn down and, in many cases, re-built from the ground up. Unlike those complex *systems of oppression*, these individual cases are uncomplicated. It was incredibly rewarding to win hearings, knowing that the result was money in the pockets of working people, especially in our society where money represents autonomy and self-determination, something I so desired for each of the individuals I worked with.

To close, I wish to reiterate my gratitude to Equal Justice America for the financial support you afforded me. As a student, fellowship funding also represents autonomy and self-determination, and I am so grateful for EJA's commitment to civil legal aid.

With Gratitude,

Keally Cieslik  
Northeastern University School of Law, 2019