

September 18, 2024

Mr. Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
3007 East Boundary Terrace, Suite 201
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for the incredible opportunity to serve as an Equal Justice America (EJA) Fellow during the summer after my first year in law school. Your support helped me invest all my energy into my internship with the Special Litigation Unit (SLU) of the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) without worrying about the financial burden of the unpaid work.

During my internship, I had the opportunity to work on fascinating affirmative litigation involving federal, state, and local entities that significantly had a large impact on the lives of New Yorkers. One of the most exciting parts of this experience was being part of a team that sued a federal agency over violations of the Administrative Procedure Act (APA). This case allowed me to dive deep into the complexities of administrative law and understand the importance of holding government agencies accountable for their actions. My understanding of the litigation process expanded considerably, as I witnessed the filing of a complaint, the response, requests for discovery, and settlement discussions. I also conducted research on likely legal issues that would arise during conversations with the judge assigned to the case.

I had the opportunity to go to federal court twice during the internship, observing how the experienced attorneys at SLU presented arguments and engaged with the judge and opposing counsel. I also sat in on three virtual conferences with a federal magistrate judge, which gave me insight into how settlement discussions and procedural matters are handled in the litigation process. I witnessed how crucial an efficient judge is to a case. An issue could take months to resolve or seconds. Additionally, seeing the attorneys argue in person deepened my appreciation for the oral advocacy skills required to be a litigator.

Another aspect of my internship involved helping clients with federal student loan issues. I assisted over 20 individuals, guiding them through the often confusing and overwhelming process of managing their federal student loans. I met with my supervising attorney twice a week to discuss all the cases, my thoughts on next steps, and her advice about how to achieve the result we wanted. I helped low-income clients apply for loan consolidations, alternative repayment plans, and forgiveness. Even if we couldn't achieve the result they wanted, my clients were appreciative that there was someone on their side, willing to give them as much time as needed to explain the non-sensical system of federal student loans. I was glad to see how even small victories for my clients could lift significant financial burdens and stressors.

One of my most memorable cases involved helping a Columbia University, Class of '80, graduate (where I currently attend law school). She had accumulated over \$200,000 in student loan debt and had been struggling with repayment for decades due to medical disabilities that left her unable to work. Helping her apply for a full disability discharge of her loans was incredibly

rewarding, especially considering she was currently representing herself *pro se* in a case against her landlord and needed the loan burden off of her plate. I worked closely with her to gather the necessary medical documentation, navigate the application, and ensure that her application got to the right place. The sense of relief she expressed upon learning that she was eligible for discharge was a highlight of my internship. This case exemplified the importance of legal advocacy in addressing financial inequalities caused by predatory loan structures.

Overall, my time with the SLU at NYLAG was an invaluable experience that shaped my understanding of the legal profession. The combination of hands-on litigation experience, client advocacy, and collaboration with experienced attorneys provided me with a comprehensive view of public interest law. It also reinforced my desire to continue working in public interest, advocating for justice and helping those who need it most.

Thank you again for your generous support of myself and public interest students in general who are working to make this world a better, more just place.

With gratitude,

Celeste Woloshyn
Columbia University '26