

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Through Equal Justice America, I was able to dedicate my summer to the Urban Resource Institute (URI) as a legal intern. URI is the largest provider of domestic violence shelters in the country, offering survivors a chance to rebuild their lives in safety and peace while breaking the cycle of generational violence that often plagues marginalized communities.

My summer was spent communicating with clients in person, over the phone, and via email to assess their unique legal needs. I helped clients obtain orders of protection, manage custody issues, and navigate immigration matters. Each client assessment revealed that survivors face many interconnected challenges, where one issue often leads to another. For example, a client who was forced to leave her home due to abuse needed help creating a safety plan for when she had to take her daughter to school—an act that might seem simple to an outsider but was a genuine threat to their safety. These are the kinds of issues that people often fail to realize consume so much time, energy, and resources. This is where I began to see the various effects of abuse, not only on the survivors but also on their children.

A large portion of my work this summer was dedicated to assisting a client with filing a VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) self-petition, which allows a survivor of domestic abuse married to a U.S. citizen to become a lawful permanent resident. Filing a VAWA self-petition requires a significant amount of time because it involves submitting numerous documents and an incredible amount of information. Self-petitioners must provide their birth certificate, their children's birth certificates, their marriage certificate, employment information, and many other documents that can be difficult to retrieve. Often, self-petitioners leave their abusive partners quickly to enter a shelter safely, leaving certain documents behind, or their ex-partner may keep them as a form of control. Additionally, they may never have had these documents because their home country did not provide them, or they do not meet the U.S. government's requirements.

In addition to these documents, the petitioner must submit an affidavit recounting their life and the abuse they endured at the hands of their partner. This affidavit is typically around 9 to 10 pages, depending on the client, and details their upbringing, teenage years, adulthood, and their relationship with their abuser. After suffering abuse and entering a shelter, it becomes challenging for clients to recount their entire lives coherently, especially after immigrating to America and facing abuse often compounded by poverty. My duties included helping the client recall and organize their life events, placing them in a sequential timeline, and ensuring the affidavit included information about their good-faith marriage and the abuse they endured.

I worked closely with one client who had four children with her abusive partner to help file her VAWA self-petition. I remember that the first day we met in person was also the first time I interviewed a client to assess her needs. I explained that I needed information about her life to begin writing her affidavit. As she began to share her story with me, she broke down crying. I felt a lump in my throat, but I made sure to remain supportive and strong for her rather than

showing my emotions. Often, when clients share stories of their abuse or life in America, it is the first time they have had the space and time to process their trauma.

A few weeks later, I completed her affidavit and asked her to come in to review her VAWA packet, complete with all the necessary documents, paperwork, and her affidavit recounting her life story. As we reviewed her packet together, we went through birthdays, addresses, and employment information before finally reaching her affidavit. I asked if she would like to read it herself or if I should read it aloud. She asked me to read it aloud, and I agreed. As I read her story, I saw tears fall from her eyes. I was also fighting back tears because I realized this was the first time she had heard all her trauma, hard work, determination, grief, and resilience captured in nine pages. The most difficult part to read aloud was the section detailing her upbringing and her family back home, whom she has not seen since leaving her home country about 15 years ago. I cannot adequately describe the pain I felt in those moments, but I also felt excited, knowing that her VAWA self-petition would soon be filed. Not only would this help relieve some of the mental anguish she had suffered, but it would also provide her with a work permit within about six months while she awaited the approval of her petition. I was grateful to play a small role in her journey to independence.

My internship this past summer meant a lot to me, especially as a woman of color and the child of immigrants. The issues these women face are so complex, intricate, and interconnected, yet their willingness to tackle them was incredibly inspiring to me. The Urban Resource Institute and everyone who makes up the organization are extremely hardworking and willing to go to great lengths to help their clients. Watching my team handle issues with empathy and creativity has made me even more eager and excited about my legal career.

I understand now, more than ever, that my legal education is a privilege that would not be possible without the support of my mom and the resources I was given. When I reflect on my education and career opportunities, I often think of the children of my clients living in shelters. It serves as a stark reminder that domestic violence can push marginalized communities deeper into the cycle of poverty and violence. URI works extremely hard to break this cycle by supporting survivors with their needs and connecting them to various resources to restart their lives in independence and prosperity. I am thankful for this experience because it showed me that the legal field needs people who are committed to dedicating their time and energy to help others navigate America's grueling legal system. Thank you so much for your support this summer.

Sincerely,  
Kirpa Kohli  
NYLS