

Declan Morrow Urffer

August 23, 2024

Dear Mr. Dan Ruben,

The experiences I had this summer fed a fire within me that I hope will never go out for as long as I live. I can confidently say that in the 10 weeks that I had the honor of working in the Unemployment Compensation Unit at Philadelphia Legal Assistance, I learned more about what it truly means to be an advocate than I learned in my entire first year of law school. I can no longer see the law as a remote subject of intellectual curiosity. The American legal system is designed to reproduce oppression and exploitation, but it is also an invaluable nexus of resistance.

This internship empowered me to develop my lawyering skills in a great number of ways: I represented clients at administrative hearings within the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry, I submitted appellate briefs to the Unemployment Compensation Board of Review on their behalf, and I provided clinical support to unemployment compensation claimants at a Pennsylvania Careerlink resource center in North Philadelphia. I also had the opportunity to observe oral arguments before Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Court and to attend a conference organized by the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network in Harrisburg, where I got to meet administrators and advocates from across the Commonwealth who are involved in the same line of work.

What I found to be perhaps the most challenging (and simultaneously rewarding) about my work this summer was the emotionally supportive role that the circumstances often compelled me to assume in my clients' best interests. Almost all of the cases I was assigned involved some degree of unlawful or unethical conduct on the part of a client's former employer. One client was exposed to asbestos without being provided proper PPE, and was later discharged for being hospitalized due to a life-threatening medical emergency. Another client was fired under false pretense after having been a dedicated employee (and victim of flagrant wage theft) for 15 years. Another client was pushed to his physical limits and suffered a debilitating injury at work as a result of his employer's inability to resolve its staffing shortages. The list goes on and on. Not only were each of my clients experiencing various degrees of acute financial distress: each of them also bore the mental, emotional and physical scars of having been exploited, discriminated against, and abused. The atmosphere they were made to endure in their hearings usually offered no validation or comfort, where their testimony was routinely ignored or devalued in favor of that of employer representatives who often lacked first-hand knowledge of the claimant's situation.

With this being the case, I quickly sensed the imperative of making sure my clients knew that I was listening to them, that I believed their stories, and that I would do everything in my power to

get them their money. This meant that I needed to know how the relevant law and procedure worked like the back of my hand, while being moved by empathy and determination to uncover in detail the facts of each case. Those 10 weeks were an (at times) arduous process, but I also found it to be extremely fulfilling and refreshing; never before have I felt such an urge to learn and grow.

I appreciate the financial support EJA provided me as I took this transformative step.

Sincerely,

Declan Morrow Urffer
J.D. Candidate, Class of 2026
Temple University Beasley School of Law