

August 31, 2026

Dear Dan Ruben,

I am writing to share with you updates regarding my summer fellowship at Greater Boston Legal Services, the ways I was able to serve my clients, and the impact that the experience has had on myself and my career.

I started my internship less than a week after finishing my exams and spent most of the first day getting a crash course in Massachusetts employment law. In addition to the Wage & Hour cases that most people think of when they hear “employment law,” the Workers’ Rights Unit takes on a vast number of benefits claims — supporting clients through the Unemployment and Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) process. While these were both terms I had heard before, I had no idea how complex the systems were, or how much of a difference it made to have even an hour of assistance from a law student. By the end of the first week, I had been assigned seven clients, most of whom were facing termination, workplace harassment, and the financial insecurity that goes along with those threats. The following week, I joined one of the attorneys after work at La Colaborativa (a workers’ rights center in Chelsea, MA) where we spent the night doing intakes with community members.

As I met with my clients and advocated for their rights, I not only developed a deeper understanding of PFML and state employment laws, but I realized how many of my assumptions about the MA workforce were inaccurate. We have this image of America as a land of opportunity, a land where people come for work because the conditions in their home countries are untenable. On the contrary, many immigrant clients of mine were surprised at how few labor rights exist here. They come to us with stories of workplace harassment and poor working conditions, and more often than not we have to tell them that the harms they’ve experienced are not actionable under American law, despite what they’re used to back home. We help them find creative ways to address the worst of the harms (oftentimes the mere existence of a lawyer will help improve the situation), but the sad fact of the matter is that employers almost always have the upper hand. This has made me realize how much abuse and inequality we have been trained to accept in American employment, and how little progress can be made outside of collective bargaining/widespread civic engagement.

We are lucky in Massachusetts to have PFML — the first state in the nation to pass such legislation. Not only has the success of this program led to countless other states adopting similar systems, but it has provided clients with protections that can't be found elsewhere, especially since employment violations are no longer being investigated/addressed on the federal level. For example, my very first client was constructively terminated from a job she had held for decades because her manager refused to schedule her for shifts after she returned from leave. Because any negative treatment is presumed to be retaliatory within six months of a worker utilizing PFML, we were able to negotiate her return to work and other things to make her whole again. While the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) also includes a presumption of retaliation, federal laws are much more difficult to enforce at the moment. Furthermore, FMLA is unpaid and only guarantees up to twelve weeks of leave, compared to twenty under PFML. My client suffered months of great financial hardship following her termination, but that would have been exacerbated if the preceding 12 weeks had also been unpaid. This law, which most people still are unaware of, saved her life.

I have been so inspired by the clients who I served this summer, and the passionate advocates I worked with, that I have decided to pursue a career in labor and employment law. I am in the midst of applying for an Equal Justice Works fellowship with GBLS, focusing on labor and employment – specifically the ways that we can use our existing safeguards to protect immigrant workers from the threat of immigration raids. Without this EJA fellowship, I wouldn't have been able to afford my summer internship at GBLS, wouldn't have been able to work with clients and learn about the issues that impact their daily lives, and wouldn't have developed a passion for this work. Thank you for your support.

Best,

Portia Caruso

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