

August 28, 2010

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I interned with the Greater Boston Legal Services, in the Latinas Know Your Rights program. This program helps immigrant victims of domestic violence while promoting awareness in the community. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn about the legal services movement, and grateful to Equal Justice America for their support, through the fellowship program. I think the most important lesson I learned was the holistic and corroborative approach that is necessary when representing victims of domestic violence. Representing a client who has suffered abuse requires not only working with that client, but also with domestic violence advocates. It requires not only researching the legal questions presented by the client's case, but also referring the clients to a good local therapist.

The Latinas Know Your Rights program is a program that serves to empower the Latino community in Waltham, MA through education and advocacy. In addition to representing individual clients, my supervisor, Attorney Mithra Merryman, collaborated with a local domestic violence organization to organize a weekly community education class. The community education class covered various topics- interacting with law enforcement, navigating the court system, women's health and protecting children from abuse. Representatives from different agencies were invited to speak with the class participants.

When dealing with individual clients, I saw firsthand the need for expanded community education. Often immigrant clients were afraid to call the police for fear that the police would report the victim to immigration authorities. One client didn't understand that she could call the police when a man had grabbed her, but not hit her.

Attorney Merryman taught me to look at things from the client's perspective every step of the way. On the first day I got to accompany her to court, I saw that she took measures to make sure that the client did not cross paths with her abuser until they were before the judge. After years in an abusive relationship, the mere sight of the abusive partner can intimidate the client. Although I know physical altercations in court are rare, I did hear one scuffle in family court, and it was several moments before the police arrived. This made me realize that the client's physical safety is still a concern in court, in spite of the security presence.

In these cases, the connection between poverty and violence was all too clear. Clients often had found themselves in dangerous situations with their abusers because the client lacked reliable

transportation or was unable to find affordable child care. Some clients had gone to court with their abuser driving, or had to bring their children to court. This put the clients in a very vulnerable position. There needs to be more awareness of the logistical concerns low-income clients face and how these effect their participation in the court proceedings, both criminal and civil.

One of the best parts of this internship was working with other actors in the domestic violence community. Although they are stretched for resources, there are many wonderful and dedicated people working on behalf of domestic violence survivors as advocates, shelter staff, social workers and therapists.

Sometimes the advocates would drive the client to the Greater Boston Legal Services office, and wait for an hour or two as we met. The advocates were always eager to know what they could do to help out with the client's case. The therapists were also an essential element in helping the client rebuild their life, after going through exceedingly painful experiences. Finding therapy for clients was one issue we grappled with continually. There is a need for more therapy services in Spanish, so there were long waiting lists for therapists who could speak Spanish. Then, the issue of costs and child care often arose.

I was grateful to have the chance to work with these clients, and the attorneys who are fighting for them every day. Yet at the same time, I saw that their legal issues were just one piece of the puzzle in a larger system where the poor, where the female and where the minorities are often ignored. I was glad to make a difference for the clients I worked with, but at the same time, it was frustrating to work within the context of the current legal system. There is such a lack of resources for people who need them the most-notably representation in civil cases. At the GBLS orientation, they said they can only take a fraction of the clients who would qualify for legal services based on their low income alone. Outside of the legal system, the need for greater access to family planning services, child care and therapy was clear, especially for non-English-speaking clients.

I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to be an Equal Justice America fellow. Although this experience highlighted gaping unmet needs in this country, it made me even more resolved to fight for these clients in my future legal career.

Sincerely,

Bethany Palmer
The George Washington University Law School
J.D. Candidate, 2012