

**Summer at Equip For Equality**  
**Charles “Matt” Alva**

I was fortunate to obtain a summer position with the non-profit Equip For Equality (“EFE”) for the summer of 2010. EFE provides free legal services to people through three different departments: 1) Abuse Investigation Unit; 2) Civil Rights; 3) Special Education. I worked with the special education division where I helped to ensure that students with disabilities received the education that they were entitled to pursuant to the federal IDEA and relevant state laws.

Background: Prior to law school I worked as a teacher. Notably, I worked in “inclusive” classrooms in which I taught students with varying ability levels, including students with disabilities. So in that sense, I had a background in the work, or at least the jargon associated with special education. With this background, I thought I would have it much easier than my fellow interns, however, I soon learned that the labyrinth that is the administrative process of special education law was daunting not only to parents, but also to the lawyers involved.

I conducted a great deal of client outreach, returning or taking live calls with concerned parents. In these initial “intakes” I would gather basic background information. However, as the summer went on, and I became more acquainted with the material, I was able to start asking the relevant, related questions that would help out later when we as a group would analyze the matter. Often, the intakes I would conduct would become my caseload and I would see these cases from beginning to end. Sometimes the assistance was as easy as a referral or an answer to a simple question, however, sometimes the answers required extensive research, work, and guidance. In rare situations, I was unable to assist the person calling. These typically followed when the parent would ask for assistance with something that was outside of EFE’s “priorities.” The challenge in these situations would be figuring out how to tell a parent, clearly in need, but

desiring something we could not provide, that EFE could not help. In fact, the main example of this type of case was when a parent would want assistance placing their child in a residential placement. EFE, as an organization supports teaching children in the least restrictive environment and placement in residential homes is the opposite of that mantra. These parents often had good, legitimate reasons for doing the difficult placement, however, it was just something that EFE could not assist them with. Needless to say, it was not easy to tell a struggling parent this information and it was something that took some time to prepare for.

One case of note that I worked on this summer dealt with a residential placement. The mother phoned in that her son had been physically abused (serious bruises) while he was at the residential placement. While the state's child services organization investigated the abuse claim, I focused on changing the student's Individual Education Program (IEP) to remove the residential placement, no easy task. After countless discussions and planning with attorneys and the mother, I was able to prepare the mother for her IEP meeting to pitch the desired changes. At the meeting the mother was able to get the school to change placement, shorten and provide an individual aide on the bus trip, and provide for protections for the student while he was in school.

I am so grateful to Equal Justice America for allowing me the opportunity to do something that I loved *and* pay my rent! It was a wonderful summer where I was able to grow as a lawyer, person, and professional.