

Dan Ruben,
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II - Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

August 30, 2015

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I spent the summer working at the Ithaca branch of the Legal Assistance of Western New York (LawNY), Inc. LawNY provides free legal services, ranging from obtaining SSI/SSD and unemployment insurance benefits to housing problems and evictions, for low-income clients in western New York.

The Ithaca office specifically serves Tompkins and Tioga counties. As an Oaklander Public Interest Fellow, I spent most of my summer working on unemployment cases, though I did get to attend hearings involving housing evictions and workplace discrimination against felons. I researched and drafted memos for supervising attorneys on employment- and civil rights-related issues. The most valuable experience for me was the opportunity to represent low-income clients in unemployment insurance benefits hearings. This was the first time I represented a client in any capacity, and handling everything from initial client interviews to cross-examining the employer at the hearing to making closing statements gave me unparalleled advocacy experience.

As part of the Oaklander fellowship requirements, I wrote an eighteen-page paper on the psychological effects of unemployment. Since the Great Depression, researchers have increasingly focused on unemployment as a threat to mental health. Due to the loss of social contact, reduction in self-esteem, and changes in societal identities and roles, the non-pecuniary effect of unemployment is often much larger than the effect from the associated loss of income. In addition, the effects of unemployment can vary depending on demographics – gender, race, social class, education level – or situational factors – current levels of unemployment in the area, family structure, degree of social support. My paper seeks to foster better understanding of the psychological effects of unemployment and, through that understanding, improve advocacy for low-income and unemployed clients. Part I provides an overview of the literature regarding unemployment and mental well-being, Part II introduces basic social psychology concepts, and Part III synthesizes and applies this information to my experiences at the Legal Assistance of Western New York.

In my application to EJA's Fellowship, I acknowledged that while I cannot fix inequality or poverty, being a law student means I can now provide a highly skilled, valuable service to the Ithaca community. Working with these clients only strengthened my resolve to participate in pro bono and public service initiatives throughout my legal career.

Sincerely,

Jessica Lam (Cornell Law School c/o 2017)