

Valentine Bate
2017 Summer intern
LAF Chicago

To:
Dan Ruben,
Executive Director,
Equal Justice America

October 12, 2017

Re: Fellowship Experience

I served with LAF Chicago this past 2017 as a law student intern, in the Public Benefits Practice Group, specifically with the Veterans' Rights Project. However, I also serve with other Practice Groups like Housing, when the need arose. We fondly call ourselves the Vet Squad.

Legal Assistance Foundation (LAF) Chicago is a not for profit Legal Services Corporation (LSC), serving the legal needs of low income citizens.

The objective of the project is to assist Veterans and their families return and adjust to normal civilian life. This include tasks such as assisting veterans to procure due benefits including the Supplemental Secured Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), housing allowances etc, from Social Security Administration through the department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). Under my supervisor, I handled certain aspects of divorces, evictions and other legal issues related to the survival of veterans and their families. I filed request on behalf of our veteran clients from medical facilities to determine Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and Discharge Statuses and upgrades from the Department of Veteran Affairs, to determine eligibility for benefits. I was engaged in community legal clinics to sensitize veterans on available legal services for them at LAF, and conducted client intakes at such clinics for subsequent follow up. Of course, some of the cases needed court appearances, and I had the opportunity of using my Illinois 711 temporary license to appear in State Courts with my supervising attorney.

I was inspired by the growing number of attorneys dedicated to public interest law practice, including attorneys from top law firms in the city of Chicago. I was inspired at how law practice could be used as a vehicle to alleviate poverty rather than for self-aggrandizement and enrichment.

My greatest challenge was during client interviews. Listening to very pathetic stories and experiences and at the

same time maintaining professional posture. Especially cases that we wouldn't be able to legally resolve. The pain of telling someone in need about the impossibility of getting legal relief for them, because of their circumstances was very disturbing to me.

I have always admired the respect with which members of the military are treated with priority in this country while still in service. However, my biggest surprise is the way veterans are treated with reckless abandon by the administration, when it comes to procuring their benefits. It was so disheartening to handle cases for homeless veterans who spent their whole life fighting for country.

I felt a significant impact, both personally and professionally to experience life from the perspective of the poor and underprivileged.

Although I was somewhat undecided on what area of practice I intend to engage in before this internship, I can now state with certainty that public Interest Law is now an option in my consideration for future career plans.

The hands-on experience from my internship with LAF is already having an edge, as I can confidently interview with employers on transferable skills acquired over the course of the summer.

It is worth mentioning here that the EJA grant helped a great deal to pay for my expenses and maintenance over the summer, and as such, I could focus on my project and gain the necessary skills I now possess. Thank You EJA and your sponsors.

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