

Emily Seymore

September 5, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My experience this summer as an Equal Justice America Fellow with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (LAF), was both educational and personally inspiring. I would like to elaborate on the highlights of my work.

I began my summer with a stack of clients to call on my second day at the office. If I can say anything about this summer, it is that I learned by doing. My role was to contact clients who had called LAF's Public Benefits Hotline due to problems, reductions or cancellations in their Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, or TANF cash benefits. I assisted them after they had completed an intake interview by further investigating the issues of their case. I was fortunate to have daily direct contact with clients, for whom I served as their representative or contact with LAF. Over the summer I assisted between 75 and 80 clients by performing a follow-up phone interview, issue analysis, policy research, and advising call with each of them. In some cases I advised clients on how they could do their own pro-se appeal. In other cases I worked with the client and the Department of Human Services to advocate for the client's rights under the administrative policies.

The population I helped was extremely low-income and included families with children, single adults with disabilities, and seniors. There are two stories from this summer that stand out to me as highlights of my work. The first is a case I assisted one of my coworkers with. I helped an undocumented mother who was working illegally to appeal the State's inaction on her citizen son's Food Stamps benefit. I attended a pre-appeal hearing on behalf of the client and argued that she should receive benefits dated back to her date of application because she had not refused to provide her income information. The State countered my argument by presenting me with other policies that were inapplicable. Additionally, they argued that she had not correctly filled out the application, although they were unable to locate her file at the meeting. As a matter of policy, I gained insight into the struggles individuals face when trying to obtain public benefits; however, from an advocacy standpoint, I argued the client's case based solely on the fact that the State was not following the applicable policy. In the end we were able to withdraw her appeal in exchange for the State's agreement to award her back benefits.

On another occasion I assisted a single young mother to receive back cash benefits under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF). This was also a case that was transferred to me from a coworker. The case was challenging because it involved two local offices arguing about who committed the error and who should be responsible. Additionally, the

local office did not believe that the client was cooperating with their efforts to locate the infant's father to collect child support. In the end I was able to obtain nearly three months of back benefits for the client, as well as advise her on the requirements of cooperation. What was challenging about this case was that I was in the middle of a personal conflict between the client and the State staff. At one point, the client, without informing me, took matters into her own hands and called the Regional Office to further her complaint. I was struck with an ethical issue of informing the client that I could not help her resolve issues with the State staff without disclosing to him that she had filed the additional complaint against him. I felt that I did a good job of spotting a potential ethical dilemma and taking precautions to avoid it.

In addition to helping many clients directly, and working on my advocacy skills, I learned to be resourceful. It was a self-disclosed challenging summer for my supervisors. I often had to rely on my coworkers and my own research skills to find the answer when I could not ask one of my supervisors. I felt LAF both trusted and valued my work product, even in their absence. This summer helped me to overcome the gut feeling that you don't know how to do something, when you actually do. It enhanced my confidence and gave me hands on experience.

The most important aspect of my summer was knowing how much my work meant to the clients. I would often hear a client yell to people in the background, "Be quiet! I'm on the phone with my lawyer." While I advised them I was student law intern, it did not matter to them. The individuals I assisted were not used to having representation, they were grateful for my attention to their case, and they felt empowered by the knowledge I shared with them. I felt especially good when I advised a client how to advocate for himself, AND I armed them with the policy to support their position.

I would like to thank Equal Justice America and its sponsors for enabling me to pursue this work. If there is anything else you need, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Emily Seymore
Northwestern