

August 31, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I write to you today to thank you and Equal Justice America for your support of my summer 2013 fellowship with Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA). This fellowship gave me the chance to work with and be mentored by Kate Meiss, one of the most knowledgeable public benefits lawyers in the state of California. Since benefits work is so complicated, Ms. Meiss had the good sense to have me cite check and edit fliers for the administrative law unit's brand new Social Security Clinics. These clinics serve members of the community who have problems with Social Security overpayments, termination of their benefits and other problems. Working on educational materials for the clinics allowed me to learn Social Security's complex regulations and serve the community simultaneously. Similarly, I learned about CalWORKs, CalFresh (food stamps) and Los Angeles County's General Relief program through research projects that helped NLSLA staff members resolve other litigants' cases.

Many of the people NLSLA helps speak Spanish, so my Spanish language capacity was extremely useful both in editing the materials for the clinics and for working NLSLA's hotline. Once I had a better grasp of the different benefits programs available in California, with Ms. Meiss' supervision, I helped answer NLSLA's hotline one morning. The hotline is a great experience for law students because it forces you to talk to potential clients without seeing them. Non-verbal communication is an important part of an interview. When that aspect is removed piecing together a potential client's story becomes even more challenging. First, Mr. Garcia¹ called. He was a Spanish speaker with three people in his family. He explained that his family had applied for CalFresh (foodstamps) some time ago and had not heard anything from the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS – Los Angeles County's public service agency). He also asked us to research a CalWORKs application he had submitted to DPSS over a year ago. While speaking with Mr. Garcia, I wrote out a timeline of events. I repeated this timeline back to him to be sure we understood each other. I also made sure to repeat his phone number and vital information back to him. Ms. Meiss commented that this was an important thing to do when working on a hotline.

After working the hotline, my next step was to make sure my conversation with Mr. Garcia and his contact information were recorded correctly in NLSLA's database. Prior to law school, I worked as a fundraiser for a college. While I was summarizing our conversation, I realized my skills in collecting and preserving information from my fundraising job had transferred to the world of public interest lawyering.

Next I contacted DPSS to inquire after Mr. Garcia's two applications. Thanks to a prior lawsuit, DPSS must respond to advocate inquiries in a timely fashion. The County informed me that his family's CalFresh application had been approved. There was no record of Mr. Garcia's CalWORKs application, but the County did inform me of why the family was over the unearned income limit for CalWORKs. Via phone and then letter, I informed the Garcia family of the good news about their CalFresh application

¹ The names of potential clients in this letter have been changed to protect confidentiality.

and why they did not qualify for CalWORKs. I made sure to tell them why they did not qualify (his wife received too much unemployment, which is counted as unearned income) and the formula DPSS used to determine their unearned income limit. While the Garcia family's questions were resolved relatively easily, this experience helped me learn how CalWORKs and CalFresh treat unearned income differently.

On the other hand, Ms. Bell's inquiries were not so easy to resolve. Ms. Bell lives in Lancaster, has four children who receive CalWORKs and can no longer receive CalWORKs herself. In June 2013, she applied for CalWORKs again for her children and was approved. She received emergency aid of \$200, but her check for June, approximately \$500, was taken in its entirety by DPSS for an outstanding overpayment. When Ms. Bell called the DPSS phone hotline, she was told that it was standard practice for the full check to be withheld. However, in a prior settlement, DPSS agreed to withdraw only 5% to 10% from a participant's check each month. Ms. Bell asked NLSLA to look into the matter.

After the first case inquiry, DPSS reinstated \$158 on Ms. Bell's CalWORKs card from a prior overpayment for which DPSS had collected too much. At first, it was not clear why the \$158 was refunded. Eventually we learned that money was from a separate transaction and the over collection was discovered when I inquired with DPSS about Ms. Bell's case.

The issue of the missing \$500 was still unsolved. DPSS said the overpayment had resulted because Ms. Bell had received CalWORKs after her time clock had run out. Through many questions and email exchanges with DPSS, we learned the amount of Ms. Bell's overpayment and how much she had already paid. After I pressed the issue of the missing \$500, DPSS agreed to refund that money to Ms. Bell's CalWORKs card. Now DPSS will only take approximately \$38 from her check every month until the overpayment is paid in full. Ms. Bell thanked me, saying simply, "Now I have money to buy diapers."

As these two stories illustrate, my Equal Justice America Fellowship gave me the support I needed to successfully deliver legal services to clients across Los Angeles County. Thank you for your support!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily B. Stork". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

Emily Stork
Loyola Law School, 2015