

August 30, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am excited to inform you of my experiences this past summer while serving as a summer legal intern for South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice (SFIWJ) in Miami. The SFIWJ is part of a coalition that forms The Wage Theft Task Force (WTTF). It was set up to aid workers in getting their unpaid wages from employers. Wage theft includes any work that was not properly paid such as not paying at the minimum wage, not paying overtime, forcing workers to work off the clock, misclassification of employees to get around benefits and taxes, not paying at all, etc.

This problem is particularly keen in South Florida where there is no state level Department of Labor and hence no mechanism to enforce labor and employment laws. Additionally, there is a large immigrant population and thousands of low-income agricultural jobs that are targets for such crime. Language barriers, ignorance of laws and rights as well as fear of going to authorities are also factors that contribute to the workers' problem.

One aspect of my work included me working with another coalition member group called WeCount! Community Worker Center in direct services. They are strategically located in an area where many day laborers stand outside on the curb every day early in the morning hoping to get a job. Their services include educating workers through free computer, basic skills and English classes; documenting and resolving worker wage theft cases; providing facilities where workers can rest, have a snack and drink, take classes, look for jobs or seek advice from staff regarding their concerns.

Given the nature of underfunded and understaffed centers such as WeCount!, I had my own clients and was given much responsibility and freedom in resolving my clients' problems. I conducted intake both in the field and at the center, I negotiated with employers regarding my clients' unpaid wages and drafted documents to be filed with the State. Sometimes success in recovering wages was as simple as communicating with employers through a phone call. Other times it required letters, demonstrations and legal remedies. Unfortunately, sometimes nothing could be done because the employer could not be traced, there was no recourse that could be taken or the client would decline to continue further.

I found at times that my enthusiasm in wanting to help my clients coupled with the thorough preparation with which I approach my work was not enough to defeat the inevitable,

sad realities of life. Taking a day to come to the center and discuss the case in efforts to recover unpaid wages meant not working that day and not getting paid for many –something that was not affordable. I made myself available at times and places that were convenient for my clients instead of during office hours only. All in all, my presence at the center facilitated the efficiency of previously opened cases and allowed for more to be investigated. I was able to secure unpaid wages for clients and expose unscrupulous employers.

This internship was a learning experience beyond the legal work to which I was exposed. I learned about myself and about the outside world that my clients represented. My interpersonal skills were sharpened as I communicated with these clients. Being a minority raised by immigrant parents and speaking two other languages was enough, I thought, to relate to this population. I was wrong. The very situation that these people are living is something that a shared background cannot bridge. After making this observation I was better able to understand my clients and in turn better help them. Some of my clients still call me today for advice. I know that I have been helpful to them because they tell me, but they do not know how thankful I am to them for sharing their stories and teaching me invaluable lessons along the way.

The experience was truly humbling, rewarding and educational. I am going to remain in contact with SFIWJ and see that I get involved with the national headquarters of IWJ here in Chicago while I am in school. I will not forget this experience and will be sure to use the skills that I developed this past summer throughout the rest of my legal career. None of this would have been possible without the assistance of Equal Justice America, for which I am fortunate and grateful. Thank you so much!

Sincerely,

Evelyn Cobos
Northwestern University School of Law, May 2011