

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

August 8, 2012

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I worked in the Employment Unit of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA). The Employment Unit assists low-income workers in obtaining unemployment benefits, enforcing minimum and overtime wage payments, filing employment discrimination and retaliation claims, and in other employment issues. As a summer law clerk, I was fortunate enough to be able to take on a range of responsibilities. Some of my duties included interviewing clients about their claims, staffing a weekly clinic for low-income workers, calculating owed wages and educating workers about how to win back the money owed to them, representing a client at her settlement conference for wages owed, representing a client at his unemployment insurance appeals hearing, and researching various employment discrimination questions that arose over the summer.

One of the reasons I was so excited to work at LAFLA this summer was because I knew I would have really meaningful client contact. Perhaps my favorite experience of the summer was working with a client whom I'll call Sue. Although I didn't know this until after I closed up my case with Sue, Sue first came to LAFLA years ago as an undocumented domestic abuse survivor. Through working with another unit at LAFLA, Sue was able to obtain documentation and find safety for herself and her child. Sue came to the Employment Unit after having worked as a waitress for 5 years. She often worked 11-hour shifts, but was never paid overtime.

Sue was owed over \$7,000. I initially met Sue to explain the wage claim process to her, including the next step: a settlement conference where she and her former employer could attempt to negotiate a payment plan. Sue emphasized her frustration with her former employer, stating that she did not want to settle for less than what she was owed since she should be paid correctly for every hour she had worked. I acknowledged that while she legally was owed well over \$7,000, she should consider settling for less so as not to have to wait up to six months for an administrative hearing where she could possibly lose the case entirely.

At the settlement conference, Sue explained the hours she had worked and how she had been paid, just as she and I had practiced in our meeting earlier. By the end of the conference, her former employer agreed to settle for over \$8000 - an approximation of the overtime wages due, premiums for meal break violations, and other possible penalties. Sue and I both left the conference feeling relieved that the process was over, but also vindicated that Sue had been able to obtain all the earnings she was owed for every overtime hour she worked. Representing Sue also reminded me that while advocates may feel frustrated by a slow system that often does not side with low-wage workers, even in such a system it is possible to win justice for our clients.

I am so grateful that Equal Justice America made it financially feasible for me to work at LAFLA this summer. While I learned so much from my experience and felt invigorated by the work I was doing, I also hope that I provided much-needed relief for the attorneys there. The organization and the Employment Unit are doing incredible work, but are often overburdened and under-resourced. I remember one instance where I spoke with a client who clearly had been sexually harassed at work, but the unit attorneys did not know if she was protected by specific time-sensitive California anti-discrimination laws because of her employee status. Since I had the time to do further research that the attorneys did not, within a day we were able to definitively determine that she was protected and could go through the normal procedures for filing a discrimination claim. Without a summer clerk, this client might not have received the information she needed as quickly.

Thanks to my time at LAFLA, I have been able to learn a substantive new area of law, work with interesting and thoughtful clients, and create wonderful relationships with public-interest attorneys. More importantly for myself, I have a renewed energy for going forward with client-centered work in my career. Thank you so much for your generous fellowship for the summer, which gave me the opportunity to cement my commitment to public interest legal work with low-income communities. I feel privileged to be joining the Equal Justice America community.

Sincerely,

Hannah Weinstein
UCLA School of Law, Class of 2014