

August 1, 2005

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I would like to thank Equal Justice America for funding my summer internship at Greater Boston Legal Services. For 10 weeks, I worked full-time with Steve Valero, a senior attorney in the Shelter division of the Housing Unit. As someone who wishes to work in public interest law, working at GBLS was a real privilege and an incredible learning experience.

Our clients generally came to us after being denied access to a family shelter. I would interview the client and Steve and I would determine whether they had been wrongly denied, which was often the case. Sometimes Steve could resolve these cases with a phone call to the director of Boston Family Housing. Other times I might collect documents such as eviction papers and subsidized housing termination appeals, then draft a letter to the Director of Boston Family Housing and the Assistant Director of the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) office that denied the application, and argue that our client qualified for shelter under the regulations. If neither of these avenues worked, we would file an appeal and request a hearing.

I worked on one case where, without our intervention, a mother of three who had been living in a shelter for eighteen months would have been terminated (kicked out of shelter) under dubious circumstances. As it happened, soon after receiving the termination notice, she was approved for a subsidized apartment. Had the termination gone through, she would also have lost the apartment. Further, under the regulations, she would have been barred from reapplying to shelter for a year. Instead, we were able to advocate on her behalf to avoid a termination, and once she moved into the apartment, the matter was dropped.

I was also able to accompany Steve to meetings with homeless advocates, such as Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and Mass Law Reform, where homeless advocates hashed out legislative strategies and scrutinized line-items in the proposed state budget. Of particular concern among homeless advocates is the high number of shelter applicants who are turned away: over 50% of families applying for shelter are denied. Because of this high rate of rejection, children remain homeless while shelter beds go unused at shelters all over the state.

One reason why so many families are turned away from shelter is that some of the regulations are misinterpreted. One regulation came up with such frequency, it looked as though it was being used as a default provision to deny families shelter. The regulation essentially states that a

family is not eligible for shelter if the family “made itself homeless” in order to access shelter. During my internship, Steve alerted the DTA to the fact that if one more denial crossed his desk on those grounds, and it was clearly inapplicable, he was going to file a class action lawsuit. This led to a meeting at the DTA, including the General Counsel, Deputy Counsel, and the Assistant Commissioner. I was able to accompany Steve and listen to the discussion. All involved agreed that the regulation was being misused, and they agreed to conduct trainings and alert their office directors to the problem.

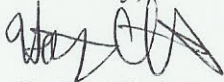
During the internship I drafted a pamphlet entitled “Emergency Assistance: Shelter For Families, What You Need To Know.” The pamphlet is a summary of relevant regulations, rights, and obligations regarding EA Shelter, written in simple, easy to understand language. It will eventually be translated into Spanish, and used throughout the state to provide vital information to EA applicants. I was excited to help fill a bit of an information vacuum for homeless applicants who often know nothing about their rights when they first apply for EA shelter.

Throughout the entire Housing Unit, there was frustration at the cutbacks in Section 8 housing vouchers, and at the shortage of public, subsidized, and affordable housing in the Boston area. The brutal truth is that even if a parent has a job, he/she may not be able to afford housing for his/her family. One of the big lessons I will take away from this internship is that our society would be strengthened by providing three simple things affordably and at a high level of quality so that they reach people at the lowest income levels: housing, childcare, and education. (Of course, many more things can and should be added to this list; its just a start.)

Another lesson I will take away from this internship is that it is better to be an *effective* advocate rather than simply a *zealous* one. Zealous advocates may end up burning bridges with frequent adversaries, making it difficult to ever reach a solution. Effective advocates gain the trust of the other side (when that “other side” is, say, a large state agency) and can achieve outcomes that are favorable for their clients while preserving a working relationship with the “other side” for when the next case comes along.

Again, I would like to thank Equal Justice America for funding this internship. I have learned an incredible amount about a vital segment of public interest law, and I hope that one day I will be able to do work that is as important as the work I saw being done at GBLS.

Sincerely,



Hathy Albright

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