

JASMINE ESMAILBEGUI

August 31, 2015

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for granting me an Equal Justice America fellowship this summer. I truly appreciated the funding I received, as it allowed me to perform meaningful work without needing to fret about my financial situation. I spent this summer working with both the Civil Advocacy Program and the JustChildren Program at the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) in Charlottesville, VA. I worked in several areas of law, including housing, consumer, education, public benefits, and juvenile justice. My summer internship was a wonderful experience, and it strengthened my commitment to public service.

I was fortunate enough to intern for two programs at LAJC this summer. As part of the JustChildren Program, I helped children and families with issues pertaining to education and juvenile justice. Within education, I performed client intake for families seeking advice about various matters. After I consulted with a supervising attorney, intake would result in either initiating legal representation or providing general guidance. I ultimately advised several families with regard to issues pertaining to their children at school, from bullying to special education. In addition, my work in education included researching topics covered by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and collaborating with an attorney and community organizer to conduct outreach to local residential communities and nonprofit organizations. My juvenile justice work primarily consisted of counseling youths committed to a Department of Juvenile Justice correctional facility. I worked with my clients, both directly and remotely, to prepare for their release and review hearings. Although I served an advisory role in working with those youths and did not represent them in their proceedings, they seemed to appreciate my input.

As part of the Civil Advocacy Program, I helped several clients with matters falling under public benefits, consumer, and housing law. Within public benefits, I represented a client who had been denied unemployment benefits in a Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) appeals examiner hearing. In preparation, I researched the precedent related to the issues in my client's case, reviewed evidence and drafted an outline of our case, and met with my client several times to get everything set for the hearing. During the hearing, I conducted a direct examination of my client and delivered a closing argument. My aim was to convince the VEC that it should overturn the previous denial and thus grant my client unemployment benefits. Although the appeals examiner's ruling was unfavorable to our case, I learned a considerable amount through that experience and was able to help my client appeal again and to aid in preparation for the next level hearing. My consumer work primarily consisted of assisting clients with issues related to debt. I collaborated with a supervising attorney to draft a demand and settlement letter to a debt collection company that had contacted our client several times to

JASMINE ESMAILBEGUI

collect on old, or “zombie,” debt. I also worked with consumers to obtain copies of their credit reports for purposes of monitoring and verifying their debt.

Most of the work I did at LAJC this summer involved helping clients with housing issues. I was assigned several clients over the duration of my internship, and with my clients came many different housing matters. My responsibilities included research and writing, interviewing and advising clients, writing demand and cease-and-desist letters, communicating with adverse parties, and preparing for a trial. I felt like I affected the lives of a few clients in particular:

1. I served two clients this summer whose property managers had refused to refund their security deposits upon move out. I emailed the property managers several times to dispute the charges against my clients and to challenge their business recordkeeping practices. After a few weeks of following up, I managed to secure the return of my clients’ security deposits. Both of my clients were extremely thankful and excited to get their money back. One of them told me that he immediately used the returned security deposit money to pay a few outstanding bills.
2. Another client I served this summer was one who had been struggling for years to find stable housing. My client had been denied housing at a complex meant for low-income individuals for what we believed to be the result of a clerical error on the part of the property manager. I contested the reason for his denial and provided supporting documentation to show that he was turned away in error, but the property manager ultimately refused to grant a review of his application. Although our attempt to secure an appeal of the decision failed, I was able to work with my client to reapply with the necessary supporting documentation. I also helped him to find alternate housing options. My client thanked me for advocating for him and told me I was the first person to care about his story or his truth in years.
3. I served another client this summer whose landlord had refused to make repairs to her home for several months prior to our involvement. The house was in appalling condition, and the repairs were necessary to ensure my client’s health and safety. I helped my client to file a Tenant’s Assertion and Complaint against her landlord, asking the court to order her landlord to make repairs. The case ultimately settled prior to trial; her landlord agreed to and eventually performed the necessary repairs.

I performed meaningful, substantive work throughout this summer. My internship at LAJC reaffirmed my desire to help low-income individuals after law school by providing civil legal services and advocating for access to justice.

Thank you,

Jasmine Esmailbegui
UVA Law c/o 2017

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Executive Director, Equal Justice America
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Midlothian, VA 23112

Re: Jasmine Esmailbegui's Equal Justice America fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Jasmine Esmailbegui recently completed a summer internship with Legal Aid Justice Center. Jasmine worked with both the Civil Advocacy program and the JustChildren program in our Charlottesville office under the supervision of myself and six other staff attorneys for 10 weeks, beginning on May 26.

The Civil Advocacy Program (CAP) provides assistance to individuals and families in Central Virginia who face legal dilemmas related to housing, public benefits, employment, consumer protection, or the rights of the elderly, and engages in systematic advocacy with and on behalf of low-income people in these issue areas. Over the summer Jasmine was able to take the lead role on a number of housing cases, working directly with our individual clients and families, interviewing, negotiating, and writing pleadings and letters. In the most factually complex and protracted of these cases, Jasmine helped a housing choice voucher holder obtain significant repairs to her apartment, repairs the client had been struggling on her own to have undertaken for over six months. When Jasmine started work on the case, the plumbing in the house was so dysfunctional that urine and feces were leaking into a large portion of the downstairs of the home, including the kitchen. After over two months of advocacy by Jasmine, every major repair requested by our client was completed.

Jasmine also handled a trial level unemployment hearing before Virginia's administrative agency charged with adjudicating contested unemployment cases. During this process Jasmine conducted interviews with the client, gathered and assembled evidence, and very ably conducted the hearing. During the hearing she performed excellent direct and cross examinations and delivered her closing argument very effectively.

Jasmine also worked with attorneys in the Legal Aid Justice Center's JustChildren program, which assists low-income children and families with disputes related to education and juvenile justice. For example, this summer Jasmine visited and interviewed young people in Virginia's juvenile correctional centers (JCCs) for the purpose of developing and analyzing the facts relevant to statutorily required sentence review and modification hearings. This required Jasmine to research and understand Virginia's statutory framework for these review hearings, as well as develop and carry out interviews and navigate JCC policies for contacting residents. Additionally, Jasmine fielded numerous telephone calls to the JustChildren intake line, which entailed gathering and analyzing facts, drafting memoranda to supervising attorneys, providing

assistance with developing legal advice, and delivering legal advice and other information to callers. As one final example, Jasmine supported an attorney supervisor during a training to service providers at a local behavioral health agency about special education law. In this capacity, Jasmine researched the complex interplay between federal and state education law and policy, and delivered instruction to service providers about the intersection of trauma, mental illness, and special education.

We are grateful for Equal Justice America's financial support which made her internship this summer possible. If you have any questions, please contact me at 434-529-1841 or kim@justice4all.org.

Sincerely,

Kimberly A. Rolla
Staff Attorney

