

August 30, 2013

Mr. Dan Ruben
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13450 Far Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you for choosing me as an Equal Justice America Fellow. My experience as a legal intern in the Aging and Disabilities Unit of Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS) far surpassed my expectations. The assistance I received from Equal Justice America played a huge role in making this experience possible. Support from organizations like yours encourages me to continue to pursue a career in public interest. After this summer I am more committed than ever to working as a public interest lawyer.

Every day I was inspired and educated by the attorneys, paralegals and other support staff at CLS. Each advocate was dedicated to treating the clients with dignity and respect. Despite heavy caseloads with complicated issues and tight timelines, the attorneys remained committed to providing high quality legal services to some of the most vulnerable individuals in Philadelphia. Even with all their regular responsibilities, the attorneys always took time to explain complex concepts and answer all my questions. They went above and beyond the basic supervisor responsibilities by getting to know me. The staff's interest in my background made me feel very welcome, even though I was only there for three months.

This summer I had the opportunity to engage in client contact with a diverse group of people with a wide range of legal issues. Accompanying attorneys on intake, the process by which CLS clients are matched up with attorneys by coming to the office during specified times, provided the chance to observe how to approach all types of issues and clients. One day, in a two-hour period I got to assist an attorney with clients whose immigration status impacted her health insurance, a family who was worried about losing their house because of estate recovery for long-term care, and a man who was denied Supplemental Security Income (SSI) because he resided in a halfway house. Learning first hand how to respond to client's questions and concerns provided a better course in interviewing skills than any in law school could offer.

One ongoing project I worked on involved reaching out to clients who were facing long-delays in service or payment for their health aides in part of Pennsylvania's home and community based services (HCBS) system. This problem, a result of the Department of Public Welfare's (DPW) choice to outsource the financial management to a new company, affected thousands of elderly and disabled Pennsylvanians who rely on these services. Since many of these clients are homebound, I conducted outreach over the phone, following up with them on a regular basis to document their communication with the financial management company and how they were impacted by these delays. I frequently used this information to update CLS' contacts at DPW to request they address the situation. At the end of the summer I used our

clients' facts to research precedent for delay of services amounting to a denial. This research helped inform the attorneys as to whether we had meritorious claims on behalf of our clients.

Other issues that arose with HCBS clients included assisting those whose services were threatened because of the resource limit. One such client was a 98-year old woman who was told she could no longer have a home health aide through HCBS because she had a life insurance policy whose cash surrender value exceeded the resource limit. In terms of money in the bank and income, this woman was living pension check to pension check and had invested in a life insurance policy years ago only to prevent burdening her loved ones when she passed. The added stress of losing the aide on whom she relied to get to the supermarket and take her medications threatened our client's already fragile health. By talking her through the options and working with her insurance company we were able to find a solution that allowed her to keep her aide and take enough cash out of the policy to replace her broken, old recliner.

On the other end of the age spectrum, I had the opportunity to advocate on behalf of two families whose children had been denied SSI despite their very serious disabilities. One boy was a two-year old, severely autistic boy, whose family had recently moved from Puerto Rico, and was struggling to pay for their basic needs and the additional services needed to manage his condition. They had recently faced a retaliatory eviction after reporting their landlord to the city for rodents and sewage in their apartment. Given his young age and the lack of treatment he had previously received, it was difficult for Social Security to approve his claim. After compiling medical records and early-intervention progress charts I wrote an on the record request letter brief which resulted in a fully favorable decision. The child's mother told us the SSI would allow them to obtain safer housing and pay their utilities, with which they had been struggling.

Another boy for whose case I wrote an on the record letter brief which received a fully favorable decision had been diagnosed with aggressive fibromatosis, a rare neurological condition characterized by benign tumors. While aggressive fibromatosis can be a manageable condition, in our client's case, despite multiple surgeries and rounds of radiation and chemotherapy, his tumors continued to grow and encroach on his spine, neck and other vital organs, ultimately threatening his life. By working with his oncology social worker, oncologist, neurologist and teachers, I was able to understand the impact of his condition on his day-to-day life and ability to accomplish basic tasks. While it was difficult to understand the medical records and the complexity of this condition, hearing his mother cry with joy when we told her about the decision validated the importance and necessity of this work. This coordinated effort with health care providers and educators highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of the aging and disability work, which fits perfectly with my background in public health.

Thank you again for this invaluable opportunity. I choose to go to law school to pursue a career in public interest, and am more excited and energized about this decision now after having the opportunity to engage in this work.

Sincerely,

Katharine Vengraitis
Temple Law Class of 2015