

Dear Dan Ruben,

I spent my summer working at The Legal Council for Health Justice in downtown Chicago on the Homeless Outreach Project. The project works directly with severely mentally ill homeless people in order to help them obtain social security benefits. Most of my summer was spent reviewing medical evidence and compiling the information in order to create health history profiles and begin constructing legal arguments. Additionally, once per week, I attended outreach at either a homeless shelter or a mental health clinic where I helped with client intake. I was able to sit in on client interviews and hearing preparation meetings. During my internship, I wrote a full-length brief on a client's behalf, which was turned in to a Social Security Administrative Law Judge at the hearing level. I was also provided the opportunity to attend the Social Security hearing of whom I wrote the brief on behalf of. The client was determined to be disabled. One's first summer in the legal field after beginning law school is overwhelming, to say the least. There is so much to take in that I feel I haven't even processed it all yet.

One case that was particularly impactful to me this summer was a case I handled almost solely on my own. I was provided with the opportunity of working on one client's case from the initial denial at the reconsideration level until the hearing. I summarized hundreds, maybe thousands, of pages of medical evidence in order to construct a mental and physical health profile. Once I had sifted through all of the evidence, I constructed a full-length brief to be submitted to an Administrative Law Judge at Social Security. After I had written the entire brief, I was finally able to meet this client when we prepared him for his hearing. After reading all his medical evidence for an excruciating number of hours, I realized I had become a bit numb to his story and his disability. I had forgotten this was a real person and not just a story on my computer screen. Meeting the client whose case I had been working on for weeks, personified the case for me and made it much more meaningful. The next day was his hearing, which I was allowed to sit in on. I was surprised by the length of the event, as it only lasted maybe six minutes. The judge determined my client to be disabled and was granted monthly SSI payments and a substantial amount of back pay. Seeing the joy and relief on his face after years of follow-up on the case, made my entire summer worthwhile.

What really struck me this summer while working at The Legal Council was the depth at which mental illnesses can break down a person, and yet, how resilient the human spirit is. The clients I worked with this summer were amazing on all fronts. They were genuine, kind, courteous, respectful, funny and overwhelmingly grateful. These people had been through so much in their lives, yet they were so unwilling to give up and stop fighting despite all the hardships. There is so much stigma and prejudice surrounding not only the homeless population, but also, those with mental illnesses. Working with these populations this summer made me much more attuned to the common conversations surrounding them. Just this past weekend, I overheard a young couple discussing a former homeless coworker they shared. They laughed hysterically as they discussed how crazy he was because he thought the government was out to get him and because he had washed a cucumber with soap in order to serve it to customers. I couldn't help but wonder about this man's mental health and wonder how I could find him and help him. The homeless population, especially those who are mentally ill, have this broad, overarching sense of dishonor and shame surrounding them. This internship allowed me to internally analyze my own implicit bias and restructure my thinking surrounding the homeless population. I plan to continue to advocate for this particularly vulnerable population throughout my life, and my career.

Thank you,

Jennifer Zmyslo

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