

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

August 29, 2008

Dear Mr. Ruben:

When I applied for a summer internship at Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services (an office of Greater Boston Legal Services), I hoped that my experience would confirm that I would be well-suited for a career in legal services in the Boston area. I did not expect how much I would enjoy the internship, learn about poverty law, and want to continue work in this field.

The breadth of my work in the field of elder law and mental health and disability rights law seemed particularly appropriate for my 1L summer. Because the practice is defined more by the identity of the client than by the type of work that the client requires, I had the opportunity to learn about several substantive areas of law, including housing, benefits, healthcare, education, and family and probate, mostly by working on cases but also by attending conferences and trainings suggested by my supervising attorney. Learning some about several different areas of the law allowed me to understand the full set of issues that our clients were facing, even if the task at hand only pertained to one area of the law.

During the first half of my internship, in helping my supervising attorney prepare for an administrative hearing with the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR), I improved my legal research and writing skills and learned how to prepare an expert witness for a hearing. Our client had applied for DMR services as an adult with mental retardation, and DMR had determined that he was ineligible for services because his IQ scores were too high (and, therefore, his disability did not fit their definition of mental retardation). However, our expert had explained to us that his scores were artificially high because of a phenomenon known as the Flynn Effect, whereby IQ scores on a given test rise over time after the last norming of the examination. After researching the degree to which this theory, and its application in cases where a person's MR status is at issue, has been accepted in the field of psychology and in the courts, I prepared the set of questions my supervising attorney used in our direct examination of our expert at the hearing in June, and I also drafted a memo to the hearing officer (which will be edited and submitted after our expert is cross-examined) that explains the psychological theory and its application in this case. From my work to prepare for the hearing, I learned a lot about how the social sciences can influence the law, especially when a theory and its application have been accepted by recognized experts in a field. Even more striking was the enormous importance of the proceedings in an obscure area of the law to our client's single mother, who had been struggling to care for him on her own.

In the second half of the summer, my focus switched to housing law, as I assumed significant case-handling responsibilities for two summary process cases, in addition to another housing case that I had begun my first week at CASLS. My two summary process clients, "Anne" and "Betty," were both elders with physical disabilities living in public or subsidized housing. Anne was a Haitian immigrant and spoke only Creole. I have been learning Creole, and although I needed an interpreter to communicate with her about her case, I could tell that she was pleased that I knew (and cared) enough about her cultural background to know how to exchange pleasantries in her language. Her failure to pay rent arose from a conflict with a family member who had been supporting her. Because of Anne's age, vulnerability, and her lack of fault, I had a great deal of success negotiating a settlement, especially because several community agencies approved my applications for funds to pay off her rent arrearage. Betty, in addition to her age and physical disabilities, had in the past suffered from mental health problems and substance abuse. After a brief relapse, she found herself in trouble with law enforcement, and as a result, her landlord began eviction proceedings. While my supervising attorney handled the defense of her eviction

matter, I helped her apply for public housing and gathered information about the many forms of addiction recovery and mental health treatment she was engaging in. We expect that the numerous letters of support from her doctors and therapists will help her eviction defense and her public housing application.

In addition to Anne and Betty's cases, I handled an appeal of a finding by a local housing authority that "Carl" was not eligible for a Section 8 voucher. (I picked up Carl's case from a housing attorney because I was interested in doing a hearing.) Carl had served time for a drug-related offense several years ago, and even though he had turned his life around since then, he had been found ineligible for the program because of his criminal history. After preparing to argue his case, which would have included direct examinations of Carl and his pastor (who had been mentoring him) and letters of support from others who knew how far he had come, I settled the case with the housing authority the day before the hearing. The housing authority had based their denial on a mistake in his criminal record that indicated a non-existent violation of probation and on a misunderstanding about his tenancy history – both of which I was able to refute at the pre-conference hearing.

I also worked on a case for "Danielle" during the full duration of my internship. Danielle lives with serious mental illness and had a poor tenancy history because of disturbances related to domestic violence in her home. Since becoming homeless, she had made decisions about her life and her relationships that proved that she intended not to repeat the choices that led her to lose her housing. After a supported housing program rejected her application on the basis of her poor tenancy history, I first engaged in advocacy with the program by writing letters arguing that she was entitled to admission and then prepared and filed a discrimination complaint with a municipal anti-discrimination commission on her behalf.

The aspect of my internship that I most enjoyed was building relationships of mutual trust and respect with Betty and Carl. I spent a lot of time listening to them talk about their lives, especially about their efforts to make things right after they had gotten into trouble with drugs and crime. My willingness to listen and empathize seemed to gain their trust, despite their negative experiences with other lawyers; both told me at the end of my internship how sorry they were that I was leaving. In both cases, the fact that I knew more than the bare minimum about their cases allowed me to be a more effective advocate. Because of barriers of language and mental illness, communication with Anne and Danielle was more difficult. Nevertheless, I was really glad to have been assigned to their cases because they both needed so much help. In contacting social service agencies about Anne, I learned a great deal about the range of services and programs available to people in my area who are at risk of homelessness, and I also became more familiar with the Haitian community in her neighborhood. Interacting with Danielle taught me about communicating with people with severe disabilities in a way that respects them while recognizing and serving their needs, and I learned much about the regulatory relationship between housing authorities and project-based Section 8 housing providers in deciding how to advocate on her behalf.

During my internship at CASLS, I often felt elated about being able to help many especially needy low-income individuals make big changes in their lives. To some, I was working toward services or housing that would provide for some of their physical needs and alleviate stress that they sometimes found overwhelming. To others, I was working to eliminate a threat to their housing, which for each of them would have been catastrophic and would likely precipitate many other very serious problems. When I was able to get to know my client and learn about his story, I enjoyed the experience most of all. In every case, however, I felt that I was doing the best thing an attorney can do with her knowledge and expertise. I am excited to continue legal services work in clinical programs at my law school and, eventually, as a career. Thank you for making the experience possible.

Sincerely,

Laura E. Openshaw  
Harvard Law School '10