

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director at Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I was a Law Clerk for Public Counsel in the Homelessness Prevention Project CARES (Connecting Angelinos to Resources and Essential Services) Program. A significant portion of my position was to be an advocate for disenfranchised individuals at various Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) offices located in Los Angeles County.

In these offices I would conduct client interviews in the lobbies and assess whether there was an issue with an individual's benefits. The benefits I primarily handled were General Relief, CalFresh, CalWorks, and Medi-Cal. If there was an issue, I would work with (DPSS) employees to resolve the matter. Almost all of the problems the CARES clerks including myself encountered were due to DPSS offices because of lack of proper training of employees, mistreatment of clients, and an overall inefficient and confusing system.

As a program, we helped approximately 500 individuals in ten weeks. There are several clients that I met and helped in DPSS offices that very personally affected me. One of these clients was a Spanish-speaking, middle-aged man who had not had a proper meal in three weeks. This man lived in a friend's broken car and had no income. He had previously been violently assaulted which required major hospital care and surgery. This client was in the office to apply for CalFresh and General Relief. When I began helping him I discovered that he had been in the office for five hours and was told he would not receive his CalFresh for another three days. This was an error because a homeless individual is entitled to receive CalFresh the same day the application is submitted. I worked with DPSS employees and successfully advocated for same-day CalFresh. He walked out of the office that day with the ability to purchase food.

A second client was a woman who was getting her benefits erroneously reduced. She had previously submitted documents three times before to resolve the matter, but the issue persisted. This woman was a victim of domestic abuse and a mother of young children. She cried as she explained her struggle to communicate with the office and her personal situation. Another clerk and I were ultimately able to get this client a meeting with a supervisor to submit her documents to finally resolve the issue.

Another client I helped was a mother and her young daughter. The mother explained to me that her daughter's Medi-Cal had been erroneously terminated. This client had taken her sick daughter to a doctor but was turned away and told she could not be seen because she did not have Medi-Cal. The mother then went to a DPSS office to resolve the issue and was told that her daughter's Medi-Cal was reinstated only to find out the next day at the doctor's office that it was not. This continued once more. I advocated until a supervisor personally helped her and reinstated his daughter's Medi-Cal.

The resolutions I was able to get for my clients were elating. However, their personal circumstances left me heavy-hearted. My experience strengthened my desire to help the vulnerable population because I personally witnessed how these individuals were mistreated.

There were many instances where I thought to myself, "If I was not here today, this person would not have been able to eat today." I felt accomplished, but I also felt like I had to do more and I needed to do more. This feeling is still very much alive.

Sincerely,



Erica Ascencio
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