

August 19, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

To begin, I want to thank you for selecting me as an Equal Justice America Fellow. As I witnessed this summer, legal services organizations across the country are facing extraordinarily difficult economic times. My supervisor at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS) repeatedly told me that law students provide invaluable support to CLS who receives thousands of requests for legal assistance each year from low-income clients. By funding public interest fellowships, your organization provides equally invaluable support to students like me who are firmly committed to working as legal services attorneys upon graduation from law school.

This summer, I worked in the Employment Unit of CLS. While the unit is traditionally responsible for handling employment related cases, ranging from wage theft claims to discrimination claims, the unit was faced with a unique set of cases this summer. In response to a newspaper article highlighting Pennsylvania's First Judicial District's failure to collect criminal debts over the past twenty to thirty years, the court recently implemented a criminal debt collection plan. Under this plan, the court seeks to collect fines, costs, and forfeited bail from defendants in cases from as far back as the 1970s. This plan, however, presents a host of problems, including due process issues and the fact that many defendants who live on welfare (which disappeared for many as a result of state budget cuts) are simply unable to pay old debts, some of which total almost \$200,000.

Some receiving letters from the court, others hearing about the court's plan through their social workers or shelters, clients began pouring into CLS asking for help to manage or reduce their criminal debt. The Employment Unit took on these cases because the court would not order the expungement of a defendant's arrest record unless the defendant paid his or her debts. Because criminal records are a barrier to employment, the unit found that the debt collection plan was inextricably linked to their clients' efforts to become gainfully employed.

As I worked on these cases, preparing motions to vacate bail judgments and representing clients at payment plan conferences where court officers would set up monthly payment plans for clients, it quickly became apparent to me and the unit that the court's policies were constantly changing. There is no established law for this process so the court's procedures would change on a daily basis. The attorneys in the unit had to develop their own legal filings and arguments in order to challenge the court's procedures when needed. As an intern, I spent a lot of time at the Criminal Justice Center meeting with court staff to learn new information about upcoming changes that directly impacted our clients' efforts to eliminate or alleviate their debt.

By way of example, I had one client who I began working with in the first week of my internship. My primary responsibility was to find out what happened to a bail refund that he was owed from a 2006 case on which he posted 10% of his bail to be released from prison. The bail refund meant more than just extra money in his pocket- it was money he needed to support him

and his son while his application for SSI benefits was being processed; it was money he needed to get his life back on track after recently being released from prison. During my initial investigation, it appeared that the court was applying/crediting bail refunds from old cases to defendants' criminal debts. I repeatedly met with court staff to find out if this is what happened in my client's case, but I could not get a definitive answer. No one seemed to know what happened to my client's bail refund. I continued my investigation throughout the entire summer until the last two weeks of my internship when I made one last visit to the bail office and finally received an answer.

During the time I was searching for my client's money, the court was trying out several different processes as to how to collect money from defendants. The procedure for handling uncollected bail refunds changed several times over and I refused to leave until I could meet with someone in a position of power. With patience and persistence, I discovered that the city and the state were working together, unbeknownst to defendants, to move and manage defendants' uncollected bail refunds. I immediately reported the plan to my supervisors at CLS who put a stop to the plan as a result of significant due process and administrative concerns. Upon this discovery, I received notice that my client would finally receive his bail refund. In my last week of work, my client received his check from the First Judicial District in the mail.

In addition to "fines and costs" cases, I had the opportunity to work on several other types of cases, including employment discrimination cases and expungement cases. In one instance, I had the chance to follow a case through to its filing with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. I worked closely with the client to gather information pertinent to her claim for employment discrimination and wrote the complaint that my supervising attorney filed with the PHRC. This case was particularly memorable because my client was a young, struggling college student who was eager to move beyond her minor summary convictions which prevented her from obtaining employment. She commuted home from school every weekend to work in the area so she could be with and support her mother who was suffering from a debilitating disease. My client understood hardship first hand and it was a pleasure to work with her and help her put her past behind her so she could achieve her goal of becoming a lawyer.

My work this summer was made especially rewarding by the attorneys, paralegals, and administrative staff I had the pleasure to work closely with each day. My supervising attorneys were supportive, passionate, and provided extremely valuable feedback on my work. I developed friendships with many members of the staff who made my time at CLS that much more enjoyable. Working for one of the premier civil legal services attorneys in the country was also an experience for which I could not be more grateful.

I went into my internship firmly committed to a career in the public interest sector and my fellowship this summer just further cemented my passion for this type of work. I want to thank you again for giving me the opportunity to work at CLS this summer. I could not have asked for a better experience, filled with wonderful mentors, resilient clients, and finished with a solid understanding that we must continue to work hard to help those most in need. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Meredith Zeitzer
Temple Law Class of 2013



COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES
OF PHILADELPHIA

Sent by email to Katie Toman,
katie@equaljusticeamerica.org

August 17, 2012

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

As a supervising attorney in the Employment Unit of Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, I had the pleasure of supervising Meredith Zeitzer during her internship with us. Because of your fellowship, Meredith was able to receive financial support while providing invaluable assistance to both our clients and our full time staff.

Over the course of the summer, Meredith had the opportunity to work with many clients on a variety of issues, ranging from wage theft claims to the draconian effect upon our clients due to the implementation of the Philadelphia court's criminal debt collection efforts. With each new case assigned to her, Meredith quickly understood what was necessary to move the case forward. I was impressed by her level of organization, thoughtfulness, attention to detail, and interviewing skills. She demonstrated a clear commitment to the work of CLS and her passion for working with indigent clients was evident throughout the summer.

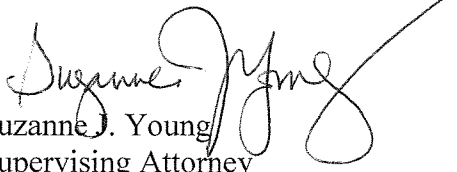
CLS receives thousands of requests for legal assistance each year. We could not help as many people as we do in as prompt and timely a fashion without the work of our summer law students. Your fellowship allowed Meredith to take an active and important role in working with our clients at a time when we are seeing our clients pushed further to the margins as a result of drastic budget cuts in Pennsylvania which directly affects our clients, as well as affecting the budget of legal services in providing services to our clients.

Within the past two years, the Pennsylvania courts' efforts to collect *old* fines, costs, and forfeited bail judgments from criminal defendants has threatened both the physical and emotional well being of our clients. Many of these defendants live solely on welfare or disability benefits (or have no income), and therefore do not have the funds to pay back thousands of dollars that the courts, itself, failed to collect when defendants were first brought into the criminal justice system, sometimes as long as thirty years ago. CLS received an influx of applicants/clients seeking help to lower or manage their criminal debt. Because criminal debt serves as a barrier to clearing one's criminal record, which is itself a barrier to employment, the Employment Unit took on the responsibility of handling these unique and complex cases. We quickly learned, however, that the court's unprecedented efforts was ever-changing and difficult to decipher.

Meredith took on the task of handling several of these cases with great enthusiasm and diligence. By engaging court staff and working hard on behalf of her clients, Meredith was able to contribute crucial information as the court's efforts evolved that enabled our office to intercede immediately! She was able to assist clients in managing their debt by representing them at court-run payment plan conferences and she helped to analyze the details of the bail judgments, thereby leading to the preparation of petitions to vacate/reduce bail judgments.

With the help of Equal Justice America, Meredith provided an important service to CLS and our clients. Thank you for giving Meredith an opportunity to work with CLS for the summer. It was a pleasure to work with her. Please let me know if you need any additional information from me. Thank you again.

Sincerely,


Suzanne J. Young
Supervising Attorney