

To: Dan Ruben, Executive Director at Equal Justice America

This summer, I interned at Northeast New Jersey Legal Services in Jersey City, New Jersey in the Public Entitlements program and as an AmeriCorps JD Veterans Legal Corp fellow. NNJLS' mission is to provide free civil legal services to low-income clients. Quite often, a client's entitlements or VA benefits were the only source of income that they had. By the time clients came to us, they were often already frustrated and confused by the legal process. My duties as an intern often involved putting in the time for compassion that entitlements agencies, landlords, and other entities will not. When I would perform intake, half of the process was simply to listen. Clients had often been waiting to tell their story, and the flood of relief to finally get everything on the table was palpable. After that, clients were more open and less daunted when it came time to discuss the technical steps to their process because we'd established a relationship of trust.

One of my most memorable experiences was when an elderly client came to us after having his food stamps reduced. We initially sent him home disappointed, because of a supposed new law that justified the reduction. Unfortunately, when the math checked out, there wasn't much left for us to do. My supervising attorney asked me to research the law so she could add it to her file. During that time, I discovered that the law had actually been revised again, and that our client's circumstances should have made it so that he was able to keep his full benefit. This was the first time I had ever performed legal research outside of the classroom in a way that directly impacted someone. It was especially important to me, because when benefits are based on a calculation and not on need, we often had clients ask us, "What am I supposed to do now?" without being able to give them an adequate answer. This time, we were able to give this client and others like him some good news.

In another case, a cancer survivor was being charged for an "overpayment" of disability benefits amounting to over \$10,000. The agency alleged that the client had shown medical improvement years before, and now wanted to retrieve the money she had been claiming since then. In reality, our client had been rendered frail from her years of chemotherapy and continued treatment. She was depressed and

traumatized by a fear that her cancer would return. After reviewing the file and the client's medical records, it became clear that the initial denial was based on a technical issue. I was able to attend the hearing when our office represented this client, where we were able to demonstrate the issue to a new judge, which eventually won us the case. This was meaningful to me because, with everything going on in her life, I knew this client would have never noticed the discrepancy on her own. As a cancer survivor, her main concern should have been enjoying time with her family, not worrying about how she was going to survive. Winning her case allowed her to finally breathe a sigh of relief after a long and complex process.

Working with NNJLS was not only rewarding because of the work we do, but also because I live in the county that we serve. It was impossible not to see how much help my community needed, but until law school, I was never sure how I could help in a way that truly made a difference. Working at NNJLS has completely changed that for me--it felt like I was serving the community right from my back yard. And while there is no shortage of people who need legal aid, I took pride in making clients feel like there is no shortage of people who are willing to give them good, quality legal service, either.

Victoria Carvajal

Rutgers Law School, 2019

Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, Inc.

A NON PROFIT TAX EXEMPT CORPORATION

Serving Hudson, Bergen and Passaic Counties

574 Summit Avenue · Jersey City, N.J. 07306-2797

www.NortheastNJLegalServices.org

(201) 792-6363

FAX (201) 798-8780

TTY (201) 798-6182

Jack Jay Wind, Esq.
President

Bergen County Office
190 Moore St., Suite 100
Hackensack, N.J. 07601

Gregory G. Diebold, Esq.
Deputy Director
Jersey City Office

John H. Fitzgerald, Esq.
Executive Director

Passaic County Office
152 Market Street
Paterson, N.J. 07505

Please reply to **Jersey City** office.

August 30, 2017

Mr. Dan Ruben, Executive Director at Equal Justice America
13540 Boundary Rd # 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Re: Ms. Victoria Carvajal

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This letter is to highlight Ms. Victoria Carvajal's work as a legal intern at Northeast New Jersey Legal Services. Overall, Victoria performed well above our expectations. She remained punctual regarding her work attendance and completed her assignments in a timely manner.

During her internship, Victoria demonstrated a strong commitment to serving low-income clients while handling a variety of legal issues, including public and veteran benefits, housing, and driver's license restoration. She assisted with interviewing clients, drafted correspondence and applications for funds to extinguish client debts, and observed landlord/tenant court hearings and negotiations.

Victoria also attended and participated in a Community Learning Education (CLE) workshop with Catholic Charities Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF). At the CLE workshop, the Veterans Assistance Project discussed New Jersey landlord/tenant eviction law with Catholic Charities SSVF staff in order for them to better serve their clients. In addition, Victoria helped create a Veteran Benefits CLE PowerPoint presentation for an upcoming government and veteran benefits presentation.

Victoria was eager to take on challenging projects. In one instance, Victoria diligently reviewed and summarized a client's medical records that spanned several years for an upcoming Supplemental Security Income (SSI) hearing. This was a very difficult task given the client's numerous mental and physical impairments. We are currently awaiting the decision from the Social Security Administration.



In another instance, Veronica spent over two hours on hold with the New Jersey Department of Labor while attempting to determine why a client was issued a temporary disability overpayment (i.e. demand for funds). Upon speaking with a representative, the information Veronica discovered led to a correction of the client's overpayment.

It was a pleasure having Victoria work in our office. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions regarding Victoria's work performance.

Sincerely,

Kirk Stadnika, Esq.
201-792-6363 ext. 3256