

October 14, 2015

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am grateful to Equal Justice America for supporting my work at the Legal Aid Society – Employment Law Center in San Francisco. This summer I served as a legal clerk in LAS-ELC's Gender Equity program, and had an opportunity to support low-wage workers whose rights as employees were violated due their pregnancy, a need to care for family members, or a disability that required accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. In addition, I had a great opportunity to also help one client prepare for an unemployment insurance hearing, and to attend three wage claim clinics at the Department of Labor to aid workers in calculating their unpaid wages and associated penalties.

I was struck by so many of our clients' experiences. Before this summer I had assumed that if an employee was pregnant and had complications with their pregnancy, that the employer would always grant them time off to medically recuperate. I had assumed that an employer would never hire an employee and then refuse to pay them, and only make false promises that a paycheck would one day come. I had assumed that most injustices faced by low-wage workers came from the lack of sufficient legal protections, and had not realized that a lot of injustice exists even when there are strong legal protections, either because employees are not aware of the extent of their legal protections, or because employers believed the laws will not be enforced.

Every day I supported clients whose stories touched me deeply, and whom I was grateful to support through my summer clerkship. One family I supported came to LAS-ELC through our toll-free helpline. This client was a new father who was struggling to navigate the complicated system of federal and state benefits, and was completely unaware that he qualified for job-protected leave. Unfortunately his wife had experienced life-threatening complications with her pregnancy and post-partum recovery. All of his time and energy was spent on caring for his new child and his wife who was still recovering, and he and his wife were concerned about being able to financially support their new family.

Through the support of my supervising attorney I was able to show him how to apply for benefits to supplement his wages while he was caring for his wife and thus unable to work. In addition, I advised him on the job-protection he qualified for, so despite this unexpected need to take leave, he did not need to worry about losing his job.

At the end of our first conversation, before I had even answered any of his questions, he thanked me. He told me that he was just so grateful to have someone who had called back, someone who was there to listen to the challenges he and his wife were facing, and someone who would be able to simply explain to him what his rights were. I was shocked to realize that something as

simple as listening to someone, empathizing with their struggle, and explaining the laws that protect them, could mean so much and have such a significant impact on this new family.

This experience taught me that effective public service work exists on so many levels of support. When I came to law school I thought that public service meant passing groundbreaking legislation like the ADA, or winning a famous impact litigation case at the Supreme Court. This summer taught me that although these are important victories, there is incredibly impactful work to be completed on all levels.

I now believe that some of the most important advocacy exists on an individual level, of being the advocate who calls someone back and who listens with a focused and empathetic ear. Of course there are many gaps in legal protections, and especially in the protections for poor people in this country. However even when the law holds protections, if a person is dealing with multiple crises navigating this complicated legal system can become an insurmountable barrier.

I was grateful for the opportunity to be an advocate and partner to so many clients this summer, to remind them that they deserved these legal protections, and stand by them as they went through the process of accessing their rights. This is an experience I will keep with me through the rest of law school, and through my future career. After this summer, I have such a deeper understanding of our legal system and how I can serve to ensure everyone can access the legal protections they deserve.

Thank you again for your support of my summer clerkship experience. I had an incredible summer experience, and am grateful to Equal Justice America for your support.

Sincerely,

Margo Watson  
J.D. Candidate, Class of 2017  
Stanford Law School