

August 31, 2014

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

Re: Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I had the opportunity to work as an advocate for the Lanterman Regional Center Special Education law clinic in Los Angeles. I was able to work with over thirty children with disabilities and their families to resolve disputes with their school districts regarding eligibility for special education, placement, services and support in the classroom. As a summer advocate, I attended Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings and mediation hearings with parents, filed compliance complaints with the California Department of Education, drafted assessment requests on behalf of parents, performed research and gave presentations to parents to inform them of their basic legal rights. I was able to develop valuable lawyering skills as I exercised a substantial amount of professional judgment with the cases that were assigned to me. While working directly with families and other advocates, I was not only able to learn about the issues that are currently developing in special education law, but I also became quite passionate about my work in the clinic. Although I interned at the law clinic for only a summer, I was able to see tangible results particularly when the parents I worked with became empowered after learning about their own rights and the rights of their children.

One of the cases that I helped with involved a child who was developmentally delayed after spending a substantial part of his life in the hospital due to complications at birth. Consequently, he required a G-tube to be fed and was delayed in his speech and language skills as well as his motor skills. Although special education law requires that a child with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment possible, the school district was initially reluctant to allow him to be mainstreamed with typically developing children. However, at the IEP meeting, the district drastically changed its position, recommending the child be placed in the general education classroom. In addition, the district unilaterally changed his eligibility for special education in an effort to eliminate his supports and services in the classroom despite also acknowledging at the IEP meeting that therapy was necessary for him to benefit from his education. In this case, the district representatives themselves were ignorant about the applicable laws. After the meeting, we were able to advise the parents on how they should sign the IEP document to preserve their child's preexisting services. Fortunately, the child was

able to start school in the general education classroom with all his services intact. However, the clinic is still currently advocating to obtain supports in the classroom to help this particular child with his G-tube feeding.

I was also assigned to advocate for a boy diagnosed with autism after the school district failed to provide appropriate services, specifically adapted physical education (APE) among others, when they were necessary for him to benefit from his special education. Receiving these services is crucial when a child is younger developing the skills and habits in school alongside peers. Although his assessments conducted by the school district recommended he receive APE and the district also agreed to provide services in his IEP document, the child did not receive any of the services he needed for over six months. After filing a compliance complaint with the California Department of Education, the investigation report found the district was, in fact, violating the law. Our client was given compensatory services from the district, which was required to issue corrective action immediately once the school-year started.

Many of the cases referred to the law clinic are outlier situations when the special education system has completely failed to reach an acceptable outcome. Because special education law is currently developing and the community of attorneys is still very small, I believe that the law clinic's most valuable role is providing information to families that have children with disabilities so they are empowered to advocate for their child effectively in the future. Parents with children that have disabilities are often limited in their resources against a school district that has its own attorneys at its disposal. Oftentimes, knowledge is the greatest weapon to fight injustice.

I am so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work at the law clinic alongside the most inspiring advocates and supervising attorneys, who were so passionate and knowledgeable about special education law. Through my experiences, I was able to develop my professional skills while also providing legal assistance to an underserved population. Thank you Equal Justice America for the support you gave me and other students interested in pursuing public interest law work during the summer.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Ponek
J.D. Candidate 2015
UC Hastings College of the Law

Dr. Meredith Anne Goetz, Esq.
Director-Special Education Legal Clinic
Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center
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July 28, 2014

Ms. Katie Toman
Equal Justice America
Building II, Ste. 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Ms. Toman:

It is my pleasure to write this letter on behalf of Stephanie Ponek, the third year law student from University of California, Hastings School of Law to whom your organization awarded a Summer Fellowship. Stephanie has done outstanding work for us at the Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center Special Education Law Clinic this summer. She is a very strong advocate. Not only is she always prepared, but her contributions to clinical discussions are invariably thoughtful and precise. Her writing reflects careful preparation and very strong analytical abilities.

Stephanie is truly committed to helping persons with disabilities. Stephanie's sincerity is reflected in the exceptional work she performs in the clinical setting. The goal of the clinic is very focused: to empower parents of children with disabilities by assisting them in advocating to obtain appropriate educational services for their children as mandated by law. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) respects parents as equal members of a team of experts who create an educational program for their child. But the statute is just empty words if parents aren't able to access its protections. The work Stephanie has done in the clinic has given parents the tools to bring the protections of the statute to life.

I have had the pleasure of supervising Stephanie on numerous cases involving Lanterman Regional Center clients who attend special education programs in various school districts in the greater Los Angeles area. Stephanie has continually been able to resolve issues to the satisfaction of families, the regional center and the school districts involved. I have at all times found Stephanie to be a caring and competent young woman who continually keeps in mind the best interests of the children she represents and finds creative solutions to complex problems. Her knowledge of education and special education law as well as research regarding disabilities has been invaluable and enabled her to resolve many legal issues at an informal level.

Stephanie has been instrumental in finding solutions to problems individual children have experienced regarding issues as varied and complex as: transition, assessment, appropriate placement and related services (including but not limited to: speech therapy, occupational therapy,

physical therapy, behavior modification,) full inclusion, and assistive technology. She has resolved issues for children with diagnoses as diverse as developmental delay, autism, expressive/receptive language disorder, medical fragility, seizure disorder, cerebral palsy and severe emotional disturbance.

In addition to Stephanie's exceptional work with individual families and children, her outreach work educating parents of children with developmental disabilities in the local community as to their legal rights regarding programming and services has furthered the clinic's goal of empowering and equipping parents with self- advocacy skills.

Stephanie also conducted in-depth research for us this summer regarding Educationally Related Mental Health Services (ERMHS) and created an excellent power-point for training staff and educating parents on these issues.

Stephanie has the depth and compassion it takes to understand the complexity of needs and variety of issues our clients experience. She also has the strength and conviction it takes to be an extremely effective advocate.

Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center thanks you for awarding Stephanie the Summer 2014 Fellowship and enabling her to work with our organization. She has been an absolute pleasure to supervise and we will miss her when she returns to school.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Meredith Goetz", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr. Meredith Goetz, Esq.