

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to thank you for the stipend I received from Equal Justice America and to tell you about my summer at Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) in Richmond/ Petersburg.

This summer I had the opportunity to work with multiple attorneys and gain experience in many practice areas including children's right, education, public benefits, employment and housing. I spent most of my time with the JustChildren program and the housing unit. While working with the JustChildren program, my clients were children with education related issues and also children involved with the juvenile justice system. With the JustChildren program, I interviewed child clients and their families, visited schools in Richmond and Petersburg, met with school staff including teachers, school therapists, and principals, and prepared for and participated in IEP eligibility meetings. I also traveled to both Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center and Bon Air Juvenile Correction Center to meet with incarcerated clients in order to conduct initial client interviews, to prepare for court appearances, and to address any other concerns they had regarding their incarceration and eventually reentry. Additionally, I researched and drafted memos and presentations on a variety of subjects relating to children.

I was luckily enough to be working with LAJC when the JustChildren program filed a complaint with the Virginia Department of Education against Petersburg City Public Schools (PCPS). The complaint described how PCPS was failing to comply with "child find" provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). I was able to assist the attorneys with this complaint by interviewing students and their families that were named in the complaint, researching the IDEA, the Child Find requirement, similar complaints and remedies. I was also able to watch the attorneys and families named in the complaint prepare for and participate in a press conference that appeared on the news. Working on such a large-scale project that could potentially affect dozens of children was a very special experience.

I also spent a lot of time with the housing unit, assisting low-income individuals and families with a variety of public housing issues. Almost every week I was able to conduct client intake interviews during which I would gather preliminary qualification information and then determine what legal issue the client was facing and whether or not LAJC would be able to help them. After conducting the interviews I would brief the attorney and we would begin working on the client's case. Some of the cases required little more than advising but others lasted for a couple weeks and included appearances in Richmond General District Court or before the Housing Authority. I also conducted research and drafted memos on different housing issues and questions of law.

My most memorable case was a public housing case that I was able to work on from beginning to end. The client was a Section 8 voucher holder, had a HUD approved housing arrangement, and was experiencing many problems with her landlord. After interviewing her and looking over some of the documents she brought in, including her lease and ledger, the attorney and I determined that the client was being charged hundreds of dollars more than she was required to pay every month, in violation of the HUD Tenancy Addendum. The client was behind on those payments and the landlord had begun the process of evicting her. I drafted and we filed a counterclaim asking for that money back. I attended the General District Court proceeding with the attorney and the client. The Judge was not familiar with Section 8 vouchers and took the matter under advisement. She issued her opinion in August, awarding our client what we asked for in our counterclaim. I was able to meet with the client, give her the letter from the judge and explain what had happened and how the money would be collected. She was extremely happy and it was a very rewarding experience for me.

This is only a small snapshot of my summer as it would be impossible to document everything I've done and everything I've learned. Legal Aid organizations do amazing work and I would love to be a part of one someday. This experience was invaluable and helped to reaffirm my commitment to indigent clients. Thank you again for your funding which allowed me to have this amazing experience.

Sincerely,

Susana Bass
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