

Dan Ruben  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This past summer, with the assistance of a generous fellowship from Equal Justice America, I was able to intern in the Criminal Records Program of Cabrini Green Legal Aid in Chicago, Illinois. My experience could not have been better.

CGLA is an organization whose mission is to “Seek God’s call to justice and mercy by serving the poorest of the poor.” The attorneys I worked with were very skilled professionals who were both passionate about the work they do and a pleasure to work for. As a criminal records intern, my duties included assisting with expungement and sealing cases by drafting and filing the initial petitions for clients, drafting motions for litigation on motions to reconsider denied petitions, drafting research memoranda, conducting client intake interviews and accompanying staff attorneys to court. Additionally, I was assigned a client who was seeking a pardon from the Governor of Illinois. I drafted her petition for executive clemency, a process that takes several months and involves numerous client meetings. In the first week of October, I argued her case before the Prisoner Review Board.

There were countless inspiring stories from my summer at CGLA. Most of the clients we served in the Criminal Records Program were people who had cases on their backgrounds from years gone by (many were recovered drug addicts) who are now struggling to secure employment due to their records. It was not hard to get motivated to get out of bed and head to work in the morning when you knew your work was going to give someone a well-deserved second chance at a meaningful career after turning their lives around. The best example of this was my clemency client, Lanita.

Lanita had two convictions on her record from the early 1980s. Both were drug cases that were ineligible for sealing under state law, so Lanita’s only hope to get these cases off her record was through clemency. Lanita had not had a single brush with law enforcement since the early 1980’s. In the mean time, she raised three successful (now adult) children, obtained her degree as a Certified Nurse’s Assistant and worked at a transitional housing a drug rehabilitation center. Because of her record, Lanita has been unable to find a job in the healthcare field. I also assisted Lanita in drafting an application for a Healthcare Waiver, which, if granted, allows a healthcare provider to employ someone with a conviction on her background while remaining in compliance with state law. Even with a Healthcare Waiver, though, an employer could still reject an applicant on the basis of her record. Lanita’s hearing before the Prisoner Review Board (the administrative agency that makes recommendations to the Governor on petitions for clemency) was earlier this week. In addition to being a fantastic oral advocacy experience for me, the Board responded incredibly well to our presentation and rebuttal against the State’s Attorney’s objections. With some luck, and some patience, Lanita’s request for a pardon will be granted in the next few years (Governor Quinn is currently working through a backlog of 3000 un-reviewed petitions for clemency ex-governor Blagojevich let pile up on his desk since 2004).

I am deeply grateful to Equal Justice America for it's support of public interest work. Thanks to the fellowship I received, it was financially possible for me to work at CGLA this summer, gain invaluable experience and respond to a dire need in the inner-city community in Chicago.

Sincerely yours,

Thad Goodchild  
Chicago-Kent