

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

October 15, 2015

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing to thank you for helping to support my summer work at Berkeley's East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC). During my summer there, I worked in the Health, Welfare, and Homeless Practice, one of many practice groups that works mainly with indigent clients in Alameda County. That practice in particular focuses largely on helping clients obtain Social Security and Disability Benefits, and hosted a weekly walk-in clinic for anyone struggling with a public benefits issue. The practice also partnered with several regional hospitals so that health practitioners might refer their patients to the law center when they identified social health risks, such as poor living conditions, insufficient insurance coverage, inadequate food stamp allotments, and so on.

During my time at the law center, I was able to work on two clients' appeals for Disability benefits. These cases can take an excruciatingly long time to come to hearing, so I took over where previous students left off and worked mainly on preparing briefs to be submitted when the hearings were finally scheduled. In preparing the briefs I read through those individuals' medical and psychological records, learning about their family histories, the origins of their physical ailments, and their mental health struggles.

One of the clients I worked for was a homeless woman living with HIV. She had a long history of homelessness, and was also suffering from depression and anxiety. Another one of the clients I worked for was an immigrant man who was also living with HIV. In addition to his medical issues, he had a history of serious depression as well, which made it difficult for him to complete even basic day-to-day tasks. For both clients, having their disability appeals granted will give them the means to support themselves in a real way, providing for a greater measure of stability and self-sufficiency.

Helping with the first case made me more aware of the homeless individuals in my community, and how difficult it is for them to find a place at a shelter or obtain basic necessities such as medical care. Seeing how difficult it was for my supervisor to get in touch with her client and to try to make sure she was receiving adequate care really emphasized how the instability and uncertainty of life as a homeless individual interferes with transitioning back into a state of being housed. Working with the second client also made me more aware of just how debilitating mental illness can be, and how often individuals might brush it off as illegitimate or not deserving of the same kind of support we offer to individuals with physical disabilities.

While this work was often heart-wrenching, it also made me feel a great level of duty and responsibility to do the best work possible for my clients – I had been given the opportunity to peer into the intimate details of their lives, and did not take that lightly. The attorneys I worked with at EBCLC also emphasized treating our clients with respect and courtesy, and modeled both compassion and professionalism for all the interns there. My summer experience taught me more than I would ever have known about the intricacies of the public benefits offered by both the state and federal government, while also giving me a unique window into the lives of people who depend on them. Thank you again for enabling me to do this work.

Sincerely,
Kit Jayne

Berkeley Law, Class of 2017