

SYDNEY HARGROVE

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

August 29, 2015

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My summer with the Alliance was absolutely amazing. From orientation, the Alliance demonstrated a commitment to our career development as an essential part of their program. Orientation was a well-planned crash course in the dependency and delinquency court systems we were to be working in; it included panels, field trips to the courthouse and juvenile hall, and live client intake training.

Every volunteer had the opportunity to work the client intake hotline for two shifts a week. During these shifts, we would screen calls from potential clients to determine what assistance we may be able to provide. I would talk with many different clients looking for assistance in the dependency system. These clients ranged from foster parents to concerned grandparents to biological parents looking to keep their children out of the dependency system.

One particular call from this past summer will stay with me. A biological dad called the hotline during my shift looking for guidance with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) – Los Angeles County's child protective services. He was an Army veteran whose wife passed away a year ago. Overcome by his loss and unable to effectively manage his post-traumatic stress disorder, the veteran checked himself into the psychiatric ward of a local hospital for treatment. Intending to remain at the hospital for a few weeks, the veteran made arrangements for his parents to care for his own 16-year-old son. Upon learning of his plans, hospital administrators reported to DCFS that the veteran left his son in the care of his parents. DCFS subsequently sent investigators to his parents' home for an investigation, which frightened them immensely. The veteran's parents were not native English speakers and did not understand why their house was being inspected. Nor did they understand why a government agency was involving themselves in their family plan. Unsure how to make sure his son stayed out of foster care and his parents remained calm, the veteran called the Alliance's hotline.

When I first answered his call and explained that the Alliance did legal advocacy for foster children, the veteran expressed that we probably couldn't help him because he was calling about an issue with his biological son. Before he could hang up the phone, I told him that although our clients are primarily foster families, I still thought it would be worth a shot to go through the

screening process so I could provide a more directed referral for his needs. After he agreed, I listened to his story and concerns. When he was finished, I rushed to my managing attorney's office and told her that we could not let this man go without helping him in some way. I felt that if this veteran was self-aware enough to know that he needed psychiatric help to the point of checking himself into treatment, we should try and lighten the load of this burden DCFS placed on his family.

After consulting with my attorney, we determined that the veteran wouldn't need to be referred to another agency. We were able to provide him and his parents all the legal documentation needed to effectively blocking further DCFS involvement. Before the end of our conversation, the veteran said to me, 'I'm really glad you didn't let me off the phone.' This day was the highlight of my summer. It's an indescribable feeling to know that you helped someone in need. I feel incredibly lucky to have had such an experience.

This summer, the Alliance provided me the opportunity to interface with clients via in-person interviews and their intake hotline. I had the opportunity to work with many attorneys who were able to assess my skills and provide feedback on writing samples. The staff and the law clerk program at the Alliance truly helped to hone my legal research and analysis skills as well as client interactions. This fellowship experience was truly invaluable because it reaffirmed that I made the right decision to leave the financial industry and go to law school. I had become equipped with skills to help and advocate for others in my community that cannot do so themselves, and thereby able to fulfill my passion of being of service to others.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

  
Sydney Hargrove