

Elizabeth A. Sines

Legal Services Organization: The Homeless Persons Representation Project | Location: Baltimore, MD

August 31, 2017

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

First of all, I must take the time to say thank you. This Fellowship made it possible for me to have the most rewarding professional experience of my life thus far, and I will be eternally grateful to Equal Justice America for giving me the opportunity to take part in such meaningful, inspiring work.

To refresh your memory, I served as the Veteran's Benefits and Expungement Law Clerk at the Homeless Persons Representation Project in Baltimore, Maryland this summer. HPRP is a non-profit organization that provides free civil legal aid to persons experiencing homelessness in Maryland. I accepted this position because, not only have I always been passionate about eradicating poverty, but I also had never had extensive experience working with clients in a legal setting. HPRP offered me more client interaction than I could have ever imagined; I was trained on client intake within the first week of my clerkship and, by the midpoint of the summer, I was handling a significant amount of client correspondence for our pro bono team. This allowed me to work closely with clients at all phases of representation, so I not only gained invaluable professional experience that will be transferable in any legal workplace, but I also forged close relationships with people experiencing homelessness in the community. These relationships were easily the highlight of my summer, and I learned an unbelievable amount about homelessness, Baltimore, and, most importantly, perseverance and resiliency from the clients I worked with.

Because the veteran's benefits and criminal record expungement process takes a very long time (requesting records from the VA or Central Repository can take months), I was never able to see a case through from intake to conclusion or appeal. With that being said, I did work with clients at all stages of the process. I would like to share a story that I feel exemplifies my experience working at HPRP.

On a particularly busy day at a clinic, I met perhaps my favorite client of the summer. Let's call him Mr. Vet. I sat down with Mr. Vet in the dining room of the Baltimore VA Annex and began the intake process, which typically takes around 20 minutes. Because I am not a licensed attorney, my supervisor would have to go over HPRP's retainer agreements with each client that I performed an intake for. On particularly busy days, or when we were short-staffed, this would mean that I had a lot of extra time to speak with clients when we had completed the intake forms. This was the case with Mr. Vet. What began as the usual, "Where are you from?" and "How are you doing today?" conversation evolved into a 45-minute discussion about Mr. Vet's life—his children, his faith, the day-to-day struggles he experienced. We talked about race and class, and how those aspects of our identities had influenced our experiences. We talked about our hopes for the future, and what we wanted to accomplish in our lifetimes. It was such a moving experience for both of us, I think because we both recognized how astoundingly different we were, and yet how closely our values and wishes for the world aligned. He was about 40 years older than me, from a different part of the country, and we are different races, genders, with varying abilities, but it was obvious we were both so eager to learn from each other and so excited to find what we both believed was an unlikely

kindred spirit. When my supervisor came over to fill out the retainers, and we said our goodbyes, Mr. Vet told me, “Thank you. I don’t remember the last time I felt heard.” If I had only had this one experience with a client during my entire clerkship, it would have been enough to make it worthwhile and significant.

I do not know what will happen with Mr. Vet’s case. His VA records will come in to the office in a few months, and my tremendously capable and passionate co-workers will do their absolute best work to ensure Mr. Vet’s claim has the best chance of being approved by the VA. Ultimately, it will be up to the VA to decide whether Mr. Vet will be connected with the resources he needs. This is a hard truth that I learned during my time at HPRP: you cannot do everything for everyone, but you can do something for someone. I am grateful for the opportunity HPRP gave me to do something. My greatest hope is that these somethings made a difference for the clients I worked with. At the very least, I hope I made them all feel heard.

Thank you for allowing me to do this work, to meet these people, and to gain this experience. I am forever grateful.

Kind regards,

Elizabeth Sines
University of Virginia School of Law



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FELLOWSHIP EVALUATION

To: Dan Ruben, Executive Director at Equal Justice America
From: Swapna Yeluri
Re: Elizabeth Sines
Date: August 21, 2017

Elizabeth Sines began her fellowship with the Homeless Persons Representation Project's pro bono program on May 15, 2017 and it concluded on August 4, 2017.

Overview of work

Elizabeth had numerous responsibilities including:

- Interviewing clients and conducting factual investigations
- Conducting legal research on a variety of issues pertaining to criminal record expungements, veterans' benefits, housing and foster care
- Preparing confidential legal memoranda's, record requests, and client letters
- Staffing clinic sites
- Maintaining effective communication with clients, volunteers, and service providers
- Organizing and maintaining case files
- Attending various Know Your Rights and informational sessions at local shelters and other community-based programs
- Attending and staffing various conferences including Maryland Veterans Legal Assistance Conference, The Partners for Justice Conference, and The Pro Bono Coordinating Council Meeting
- Representing HPRP in community programs and client outreach
- Developing comprehensive case summaries after assessing veterans' military and medical records

Performance

Elizabeth worked well independently and within the pro bono team. Elizabeth adapted quickly and easily to the extremely fast paced environment of the program. She was able to multitask, organize, and prioritize her assignments. She was also able to seek supervisory assistance when appropriate.

Elizabeth was extremely diligent in preparing confidential legal memoranda's, record requests, client letters, and case summaries. Her tasks were completed in a timely manner and the quality of her work was thorough and accurate.

Elizabeth worked very well with clients, volunteers, staff, and outside providers. Elizabeth maintained a very positive and calm disposition regardless of how stressful a situation was that arose. During her interviews with clients she was able to listen and accurately identify the legal issues a client was seeking assistance with.

Elizabeth provided insightful suggestions and ideas for law student recruitment that we implemented.

Elizabeth far surpassed my expectations as a law clerk.