

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

August 31, 2018

Dear Dan Ruben:

Thank you to Equal Justice America for your support of my work at Greater Boston Legal Services Welfare Law Unit (“WLU”). As anticipated, working with WLU attorneys this summer provided an opportunity to model client-centered direct representation with the support of experts, both in this substantive area of law and this model of lawyering. I will draw on this experience in my future internships and work.

My primary contribution to the WLU this summer was increasing the unit’s capacity to provide legal support to clients navigating cash and food assistance programs. In this role, I conducted intake interviews and handled client correspondence, strategized and developed legal theories with my supervisor, developed relevant factual records with clients, and acted as the primary contact for state agency staff from the Department of Transitional Assistance (“DTA”).

The WLU resolves most disputes by working with DTA staff at the office level, as opposed to at hearings. With comparably less pressure and capacity issues than, say, addressing housing crises for low-income people on a crowded court’s timeline, this work has allowed space for the WLU to model more intentional and affirming interactions with clients.

For one, in the first weeks of my time, experts from the unit trained me on client-centered communications and specific tools to address language access issues. This allowed me to develop a stronger relationship with a client whose first language is Haitian-Creole. This affirming approach also mitigates some of the stigma of poverty reinforced by program rules and interactions with DTA, by situating this person’s experience in context. Again, my use of the basic language access tools allowed this same client and I to develop a trusting relationship, while her communications with DTA frustrated her and led to little progress. Consequentially, both the client and I now saw that the gap in communication with DTA arose not from her English language ability but from the differing skills and resources used by the people she interacted with to work across a language gap.

In addition to language access, this unit recognizes the skills and training that social workers bring to direct representation and has a depth of experience advocating for policies and practices—internally and externally—that reduce barriers for individuals with disabilities. My supervisor’s approach to supervision also reflected these values. She took her responsibility as my supervisor as a central piece of her duties throughout the summer and gave me her time and trust. She was skilled and thoughtful about working with me on client representation and understanding the rules and practices at issue, as well as larger social policy questions. I would particularly recommend working with the WLU of GBLS to other students who want to learn

and model these affirming interactions with vulnerable clients with the support necessary to develop these skills.

The WLU's approach to client communication stood in sharp contrast with the culture created by public benefits rules and policies at the state and federal levels. Before connecting with GBLS, each of the clients I worked with had already spent her time and energy working with DTA staff to navigate complex rules and trying to communicate her situation with the words DTA might recognize. Each had her own skills and faced her own challenges. Policy makers from federal legislators to local office staff see the burdensome hurdles they create with rules and regulations as necessary pieces of program administration. Working directly with clients affirmed my understanding that safety net programs focus more on keeping ineligible low-income households out than connecting eligible low-income households with benefits. My proximity to the resilient yet vulnerable clients I worked with this summer particularly strengthened my skepticism of work requirements, which focus more on penalties than bridging gaps between someone's training and experience and the jobs available in her area. The proposal to expand this ineffective and punitive model to health care would negatively impact every client I worked with this summer, and their children.

Thank you, again, for your support of my time working with the WLU at GBLS this summer. This opportunity allowed me to build skills that promote language and disability access for the critical services of civil legal aid.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MacKenzie Speer', written in a cursive style.

MacKenzie Speer
Northeastern University School of Law, Class of 2020



August 8, 2018

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing regarding MacKenzie Speer's EJA-supported summer internship in the Welfare Law Unit at Greater Boston Legal Services. As MacKenzie's supervisor for the summer, I can confidently say that MacKenzie was an outstanding addition to our team this summer.

During her internship, MacKenzie provided thoughtful and compassionate representation to a range of clients. For example, she handled a case for a client who had been terminated from cash assistance and had subsequently reapplied and been denied. MacKenzie quickly grasped complicated aspects of Massachusetts' cash assistance program in order to help the client assert her right to disability accommodations and protections in the application and eligibility review process. In other cases, MacKenzie built upon her existing strong knowledge of the SNAP program (aka Food Stamps) to advise several clients on SNAP eligibility, and in one of these cases, she developed and wrote a request for retroactive SNAP benefits of nearly \$2000 for a client who was wrongfully denied in the past. She also performed legal research and showed excellent analytic and legal research skills.

Even though she did not have a lot of prior experience working directly with our client population, MacKenzie showed genuine sensitivity and empathy for her clients. It can be challenging to work with many of our clients due to language barriers, disabilities, trauma histories, housing instability and other crises. Despite these challenges, MacKenzie was able to develop a good rapport with her clients and was able to explain complex rules to them in ways they could understand. She is well on her way to developing the skills needed for a culturally competent, client-centered practice.

In sum, throughout her internship, MacKenzie was thoughtful and mature, and consistently took initiative and showed remarkable intelligence, insight, and judgment. She was professional with colleagues and clients alike, and quickly showed that she could operate well within our client-centered practice. It was a pleasure to have MacKenzie with us this summer, and we thank Equal Justice America for supporting her internship!

Sincerely,

Lizbeth Ginsburg
Senior Attorney
Welfare Law Unit