

## Public Counsel, Connecting Angelenos to Resources and Essential Services Project

This summer, I had the opportunity to extern at Public Counsel, the nation's largest pro bono law firm, in Los Angeles. While Public Counsel assists in various practice areas, including appellate law, veterans' advancement, children's rights, community development, consumer law, early care and education, homelessness prevention, immigrants' rights, and opportunity under law, I was assigned to a specific project within the homelessness prevention named Connecting Angelenos to Resources and Essential Services ("CARES"). CARES' mission is to assist Los Angeles residents in attaining, maintaining or contesting their wrongful denial or termination of public assistance benefits, such as General Relief ("GR") and CalFresh (formerly known as food stamps). The income requirements to receive GR benefits mean that the clients we served were the most vulnerable and economically challenged, and we were advocating on behalf of Los Angeles' low-income or homeless population. Many of the people we encountered at the various DPSS offices suffered from physical or mental ailments, others had severe language barriers, and still others were recently released from incarceration. All were seeking any means to help assist them afford basic necessities such as food, medication and shelter.

Twice a week, the CARES summer clerks and I attended various Department of Public Social Services ("DPSS") offices throughout Los Angeles County to ensure that the benefits applicants and recipients were not experiencing undue administrative barriers in applying or receiving their benefits, which has been an issue in Los Angeles County. Because the eligibility requirements for these benefits are comprehensive and stringent, we found that many GR applicants and recipients felt lost and let down by the system and were extremely grateful for any assistance we were able to provide in helping them navigate through the cumbersome process. Before going out to various DPSS office, CARES clerks would train associates from participating Los Angeles law firms on general information relating to GR, the procedures for applying or contesting the denial or wrongful termination of such benefits and how to approach a client or interact with GR applicants/recipients in a mindful manner. Our on-site advocacy

was unique, effective and comprehensive in that it helped our clients better navigate the public service system by working closely with DPSS social workers to either 1) allow for a much-needed resolution in attaining or maintaining the clients' GR benefits or 2) allowed us to communicate to our clients what exact steps they needed to take in order to have their benefits reinstated or approved.

I learned a great deal during my time with Public Counsel's CARES, and CARES is responsible for my newfound interest in wanting to ardently help the homeless and economically vulnerable. I learned that, contrary to public perception, many homeless people are employed but are unable to afford the high cost of rent in Los Angeles with their low-paying wages. I discovered that many, if not most, of the homeless residing in Los Angeles lost their homes when they encountered an unfortunate event, such as a bad car accident or medical ailment, causing them to be unable to pay rent because they were living paycheck to paycheck, and forcing them onto the streets. I found that there are many more homeless women and children now than previously, many of them having chosen to leave their homes because of domestic violence or other concerns to their safety and well-being. I found that it is extremely difficult to receive or attain public benefits and incredibly easy to lose them. I learned that while many DPSS social workers were kind and helpful to those seeking help, many were not until CARES clerks and its trainees stepped in to advocate on their clients' behalves. Perhaps most humbling to me, I found that with a different set of circumstances, it could easily have been any one of us—the CARES clerks, the associates, the social workers, etc.—that were in need and desperate for any kind of kindness or assistance to help afford basic necessities.

I am extremely thankful for and humbled by my time at Public Counsel. It will remain one of my most memorable and fond summers because it reminded me of the incredible need present in my community and how not only gratifying public service is, but that such public service is a cornerstone in any worthwhile social progress.

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