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**Workplace Justice Project, MFY Legal Services, Inc.**

As I end my two-year fellowship, I would like to thank Equal Justice America again for its invaluable support of my work with the Workplace Justice Project (“WPJ”) at MFY Legal Services, Inc. With EJA’s help, I have spent a busy and productive two years with MFY – and am happy to say that MFY has raised funds to keep me on after my fellowship ends.

The WPJ Project addresses the many problems facing the City’s low-wage workers – through advocacy, litigation, support for community organizing, and policy work.

During the past two years, I have had the opportunity to work on a number of complex cases in both federal and state court. My first case concerned the practice of locking-in janitors overnight at two grocery stores throughout the City. That suit was filed in collaboration with the Fifth Avenue Committee (“FAC”), a community-based group in Brooklyn. The case recently settled for an undisclosed amount for the three plaintiffs. The attention surrounding the case led to City Council legislation to increase the fines for such practices. I also filed, and settled, a federal case challenging the practice of requiring home health attendants to work 24-hour shifts but be paid for only 12 hours of work.

Currently, I am working on two multiple-plaintiff cases in the restaurant industry in conjunction with two community-based organizations and am developing two additional cases to file. In one case, we represent a group of seven clients who worked delivering pizzas for a famous Manhattan restaurant. The plaintiffs routinely worked between 59-80 hours a week, receiving as little as \$2.50 an hour without overtime premiums. In another case, we allege that a group of investors in a restaurant fraudulently closed the original restaurant and opened a “new” restaurant on the same site to avoid repaying loans made by the employees or the wages due. The women kitchen workers in that case worked twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. They often went weeks without pay, and when they were paid it was well below the minimum wage with no overtime premium. Such problems are endemic to the restaurant industry.

These complex cases offer the opportunity to strategically challenge illegal practices that are standard in these industries. By bringing high-visibility cases, in conjunction with community partners, we strive to have an impact beyond the individual clients we represent.

Through our weekly hotline and twice-monthly clinic, I have also advised and provided brief services to countless low-wage workers on issues including minimum wage and overtime rights, disability, discrimination, medical leave, health and safety, and pensions. This allows our project to watch for emerging legal issues while also providing a real service to the working poor.

I recently was a guest on a local radio program discussing workers’ rights to the minimum wage and how to go to small claims court to recover unpaid wages. An immigrant

worker who heard the program called our hotline for advice. I am currently representing her to recover wages due when she cared for an elderly client in her home – working round-the-clock without break from Monday to Friday. Another clinic client sought our advice after he was fired for asking that his employer continue to pay him on the books, rather than by cash. Our investigation showed that the employer was requiring the client to perform skilled bookkeeping work off the clock for the past six years without any additional compensation. We are now representing that client in federal litigation.

A key component to my work with MFY has been a commitment to intensive collaboration with community-based organizations. For example, I have developed a strong relationship with FAC first through collaboration on the janitor litigation and related legislative advocacy. That relationship is now shifting gears to focus on legal support for the community-based worker organizing they are doing in Sunset Park, a working class, immigrant neighborhood in South Brooklyn. I run workshops for the group, attend the monthly workers' meetings, and represent members in actions for unpaid wages. Because FAC does not have a lawyer on staff, I am an important resource for their organizing. I am replicating this model with a number of other community groups based in different parts of the City. In this way, I can leverage the impact of my advice and expertise to reach far beyond the individual clients that I can serve.

Finally, I have recently seen the culmination of a two-year effort to push for reform of the New York State Department of Labor, the agency charged with enforcing the state's wage and hour laws. I helped lead a coalition that authored a blueprint for reform which focuses on six key areas in need of attention. Our press conference for the release of the report, at which I spoke, garnered significant press coverage and interest. With the election of a new governor, we are now poised to have a significant impact on the next administration's vision for the Department.

In the past two years, I have learned and accomplished a great deal. Without the support of Equal Justice America, I would not have had this opportunity. And because of the project's success, MFY has raised sufficient funds to keep me on staff at the end of my EJA Fellowship.