

September 12, 2018

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

Re: EJA Fellowship 2017-2018

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I write to express my gratitude to you and to Equal Justice America for the support you have given me as a student director of the Yale Law School Temporary Restraining Order Project (TRO Project).

Thanks to your support, the TRO Project was able to once again staff our office in the New Haven Courthouse where we provide assistance for victims of domestic violence who are seeking restraining orders. This year, we recruited and trained a new cohort of over two dozen student volunteers. We also organized a for-credit seminar with the attorneys at New Haven Legal Assistance to help educate our classmates about the dynamics of and legal issues around domestic violence.

In my role as a director, I placed particular emphasis on training this year's new volunteers. A majority of our volunteers are first-year law students, and are excited to leave the classroom to do some real service work in their community. By working with the attorneys at New Haven Legal Aid and the clerks at the local courthouse, we are able to bring these new students up to speed on domestic violence law and the TRO process. Of course, after the new volunteers were trained, much of my time was spent doing the same work as the bright-eyed 1Ls – staffing our courthouse office and assisting applicants.

In many ways, there was no “typical” applicant that walked into our office this year. I helped men and women of many ages and backgrounds apply for restraining orders. The reasons they came into the office were often quite divergent. Many sought to free themselves from an abusive spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend. Others were looking for protection from a family member, or even a roommate. A few of those who walked into our office expressed no desire for protection for themselves – but hoped to inquire about requesting an order that would protect their minor children. Still, I wish to describe one particularly powerful, if not completely representative, case that I worked on this year.

In this case, a woman came in seeking protection from her brother. They had recently had a falling out, and it had turned violent. He violently assaulted her during a family event, and had since been threatening to do it again. Worse still, the brother was a firearms instructor – which made his threats carry even more weight.

In this situation, the applicant expressed that she felt like she had no support. Because this was an intra-family conflict, many of her own family members had tried to stay neutral, or to dissuade her from getting legal protection that she desperately needed. Without a lawyer or informal support, she expressed that she felt alone in the navigating the process.

In this respect, we were able to provide the applicant with a safe space where she could tell her story without judgment or mixed interest on the part of the listener. In addition, we took time to make sure she felt supported and informed about the process of applying for a TRO. We were able to explain the forms that she would need to fill out, and the next steps in the process for getting and serving a TRO. With our help, she was able to submit an application for an ex parte TRO that afternoon.

Her story is just one of the many I heard during my shifts at the TRO Project courthouse this year. It is experiences like these, and the knowledge that the volunteers I have helped train have countless more of these stories, that have made the TRO Project such a defining element of my three years in law school. I would like to thank you and Equal Justice America once again for the support you have given us in keeping the TRO Project a robust and useful organization.

Sincerely,

Brendan Costello
Yale Law School 2019