

June 4, 2017

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

Re: EJA Fellowship 2016-2017

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I would like to convey 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.

This year the TRO Project recruited and trained over fifty student volunteers to staff an office in the New Haven courthouse where we provide assistance for victims of domestic violence who are seeking restraining orders. We also invited a speaker to campus and organized a seminar with the attorneys at New Haven Legal Assistance to help educate our classmates about the dynamics of and legal issues around domestic violence.

As a director, part of my role was ensuring that we were providing our volunteers with up-to-date information and materials that reflected changes to Connecticut's restraining order law, effective this past October. I was also involved with training our volunteers, many of them in their first year of law school, to be confident and competent volunteers. However, the heart of the director job is aiding TRO applicants, either in-person in the office or as the daily on-call director. Two experiences with applicants exemplify the benefit I believe we provide the community by this volunteer service.

The first was an older applicant with limited literacy seeking a restraining order against a threatening ex-girlfriend. Throughout the application process, he expressed his mistrust of the legal system. I do not think he would have completed the entire application without me being able to take the time to walk him through every part. Furthermore, when he was writing the affidavit explaining why he was seeking a restraining order, he was continually on the verge of giving up because he thought the judge would look down on him for his poor writing. I was able to reassure him that the judges do not care about perfect writing or impeccable spelling, and that they are used to seeing the whole range of styles and ability. I tried to impress upon him the importance of including as many details as possible, and he was eventually able to complete and submit the entire application. Because of these additional hurdles, the application took much longer than usual, so I was glad that I was available to provide support and assistance beyond the capacity of the court personnel—who are perpetually busy—to provide.

The second was a woman seeking a restraining order against her abusive and heavily-armed husband. Because of new changes to Connecticut's domestic violence laws in situations

involving firearms, this applicant only had four days to get the TRO and hearing order served on her husband, rather than the usual twelve days. Four days is short in any circumstance, but because her husband was traveling out of state at the time, the service process was further complicated. I was able to work with this applicant and the clerk's office to create a plan for her to get timely proof of service, necessary for the restraining order and hearing order to be valid. As you may imagine, this woman was in a highly emotional state, which made navigating service and marshals and other court procedures extra difficult. I was glad to be able to use my experience and knowledge to ease her way, and the woman was ultimately able to get proof of service within the four days.

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 time in law school so far. I would like to thank you and Equal Justice America again for the support you have given us in keeping the TRO Project such a robust and useful organization.

Sincerely,

Erin van Wesenbeeck

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Yale Law School 2018