

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This past summer I had the opportunity to intern as a law clerk for the Alliance for Children's Rights ("the Alliance") in Los Angeles, CA. The Alliance provides legal advocacy for foster children, specifically regarding their education and healthcare rights, and their Caregivers. In addition, the Alliance provides representation in adoption and guardianship proceedings for low-income families. As L.A. County is home to the largest population of foster children in the country, with over 30,000 foster youth currently in the dependency system, I am incredibly grateful to have been able to serve such a vulnerable community in my hometown.

My time as a legal intern was extremely hands-on. The first week, I received extensive training regarding: the Alliance and their areas of expertise, the interworking of the Dependency system itself, and on how to conduct intake for individuals who have recently undergone traumatic events. I spent the rest of my 12 weeks working within the Benefits Program, working with Caregivers who had received no or improper Benefits from the State on behalf of the foster child. This is an incredibly critical matter as, oftentimes, Caregivers suddenly take on the role for a niece or nephew or grandchild who has entered the foster care system. Because the decision is typically unplanned, Caregivers often do not have sufficient funds to raise an additional child. As a result, the humble Benefits provided by the State can support Caregivers in providing adequate care.

By the second week, I was handed my caseload and immediately began calling individuals to conduct inquiries. With these individuals, I shared the positive news that the Alliance's Benefits Program would like to take on their case. I then prepared and mailed legal materials, such as limited retainers and HIPAA's, for them to sign and return. Upon receipt, I recorded and filed the documents before proceeding with the next stages for each particular case. By the end of the internship, I had been actively involved in every stage of litigation- from intake, to inquiries, to making informal and formal requests to the State, collecting evidence, filing, writing briefs, and attending the hearings!

My supervisors were dedicated to my professional growth and my understanding of legal advocacy work in the Dependency System at large. Because of this, they included me in as many administrative meetings, phone calls with clients, and court visits as they could. In addition, they brought me to county-wide, Dependency System policy meetings. These meetings were particularly interesting because many of the different perspectives and voices from within the System were expressed. The Department of Children and Family Services and the Dependency Court had representatives at these meetings, and were joined by advocates for foster children from numerous organizations. While some opposing viewpoints did subtly arise, the day usually ended in collaboration and proposed next steps.

In addition to all of the neat opportunities I had during my internship, the most meaningful component of my role was the frequent interaction with our clients and potential clients. Through conducting intake twice-a-week, I spoke with a wide array of callers – their only commonality being a recent experience with a traumatic or life-changing event. These callers included biological parents whose children had entered foster care, estranged family members, Caregivers, and teens who were about to age out of the Dependency System.

These calls often proved to be difficult, particularly when the legal issues the callers were facing were outside the scope of what the Alliance could provide. Nevertheless, even for cases that the Alliance could not take on, we provided referrals and/or suggestions whenever possible. However, from what I observed, it seemed as though these callers most appreciated the fact that somebody was listening to them and responding with empathy. The Dependency System is neither entirely efficient nor transparent, and it was an honor to make callers who felt frustrated and lost in the system, feel heard and understood.

There are a couple of more-time intensive projects I worked on that will continue to impact me as I move forward with my career. For one of them, I had the opportunity to draft an appellate brief for a Caregiver who had been receiving the “basic rate” for the child for whom she was caring, despite his significant emotional needs. These needs required additional time and attention from the Caregiver, costing her job, and affected the upbringing of her toddler son. However, the Alliance’s request for a proper re-evaluation of the child’s needs, and a rate increase accordingly, had been denied several years before. Dependency System appeal requests are rarely granted, and although this one was, it took several years to get back into court. It was a privilege, and a challenge, to have the responsibility of drafting this appeal.

A second time-intensive project was my assignment to write a research memorandum on behalf of a child who had been placed out of state. The complexities of his particular case resulted in improper Benefits, and no blatant legal recourse. I was able to use my creativity in both the research memorandum and the appellate brief above.

Another project involved a case that had been ongoing for years for an elderly woman to receive the proper Benefits for the two children for whom she was a Caregiver. A majority of the children in the foster care system have developmental, emotional, or physical disabilities, as a result of their circumstances. The two children in the elderly woman’s care happened to have all of the above. Meanwhile, the woman was herself experiencing medical issues that made it difficult for her to record-keep all of the documents relating to the children, including medical records. My task was to acquire all pertinent medical records so that the Alliance could begin to build their evidence, in case suit needed to be brought.

In addition to all of this, I also was able to file for a Spanish-speaking family’s adoption of two children. This was an emotional experience, and the best way to end the summer. My time at the Alliance for Children’s rights will continue to impact me as a person, and in my career. I hope to carry the same passion and compassion in my work as the Alliance’s attorneys do every day.

I would not have been able to fully commit to this experience had it not been for your support. Without your grant, I would’ve had to find an additional summer job to help pay for some necessities. This additional summer job, in addition to my 1-1.5-hour commute each way, likely would have prevented me from completing 35-40 hours at the Alliance every week. I can’t thank EJA and EJA’s donors enough!

Thank you,

Christina Saad  
George Washington University Law School  
Class of 2021