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Dan Ruben,

This summer, I worked in the family advocacy unit at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia. I found the work to be tiring but extremely rewarding. I was assigned six direct clients, where I was lead on the case. However, I worked with several other clients doing their initial intake, attending court hearings, single case-plan meetings, and helping with several different tasks.

Almost all my clients were of color, all were low-income, and most of our clients in the family advocacy unit are women. We are a court-appointed office. Philadelphia has a high population of impoverished people of color. Many end up involved with Department of Human Services (DHS) through their children or have had past experiences with DHS.

The Family advocacy Unit served families who have active cases through DHS. We served families with truancy and dependency petitions. This means that we directly served clients whose children were to be adjudicated dependent from the parent. Typically, children were adjudicated based on the parent's present inability to take care of the child or children, but sometimes we saw adjudication based on abandonment.

Unfortunately, present inability could be related to several issues. The biggest problem we saw in Philadelphia was poverty. In addition, many of my clients had past involvement with the system as a juvenile, had criminal records, issues with domestic violence, alcoholism, substance abuse, and homelessness. All of these could be reasons for the department to say that a parent has a present inability to care for and adequately raise their children.

The most heartbreaking part of this work was that parents just needed help and often had no one to turn to. In turn, the state and county seemed very willing to remove children from their homes and families at the drop of a hat. I learned all about the issues with the child welfare system, adoption, and foster care system and saw how it directly impacted families of color.

In the last few weeks of my internship, my supervisor began to give me more responsibility. I was able to do an in-person intake with a client in jail. She trusted me to lead negotiations with DHS for another client seeking to get his daughter back in the home and let me lead on calls to the city solicitor and prosecutors' office.

I learned from my experience that while I still don't have a big desire to do direct representation, I do have a passion for helping create policy for the families that I helped. There are many changes that I would like to see within the system, not just within the child welfare world, but relating to racial equality and discrimination based on socio-economic status. I would like to make it easier for struggling parents to thrive and keep their kids. I don't believe that all parents involved with the system are bad parents. I think that a series of events failed them as children and continue to fail the following generations. I was able to see this first-hand working on CLS.

I thank EJA for the experience of working somewhere so rewarding and for funding me while doing it; I look forward to the many opportunities ahead of me.

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