

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am one of the fortunate ones. Last summer, I was fortunate enough to be awarded a legal services internship where I had the opportunity to serve clients directly. This summer, once again, I was able to get down to the matter and advocate for low-income, limited-English proficient individuals who are unable to access benefits because of the language barrier. My advocacy did not end there; it extended to extensive legal research, legislative history and an in-depth understanding of Title VI and its guidelines prohibiting discrimination based on national origin including language.

I worked at Community Legal Service of Philadelphia in the Language Access Unit. I was able to advocate for low-income limited English proficient individuals. My work this summer gave me a clearer understanding of the struggles many immigrants and poorly educated people in the community face. Many are turned away from receiving public benefits because of the language barrier. Many of them who know they have been treated unfairly are unable to access justice because they do not understand the language.

Through my work, I came across several US citizens who were limited in their English. A number of them were elderly and in need of public benefits. The case of a 73-year-old immigrant man who neither spoke nor understood English struck me. He owned a home that was in need of repair and through the assistance of a community volunteer; he applied to the city for home repair services that he qualified for. After he applied, he was sent notices in English, which he was unable to read. He was also called and when he said the name of his language in order to alert the person on the other line that he did not speak any English, the representative from the agency hung up on him. A few weeks later, he was removed from the list because of failure to respond. He was not aware of

this until after he informed the community volunteer that he wanted to know the status of his application. They found out he had been removed from the list. It was at this point they came to CLS. His house was falling apart with a leaking roof, rotted windowsills and was a general health hazard because of all the dampness. In my advocacy for them, I found that many agencies have no interpreters, and are reluctant to get them. They see it as a burden and it was a big hurdle convincing them to put him back on the list and making a notation on his file that he needed to be contacted in the language he speaks and not English. The agency did not seem to comprehend the fact that Title VI prohibited national origin discrimination, which includes denial of access to benefits because of a language barrier.

The privilege to help those in need, the hopeless and the helpless, has made me more grateful for the opportunities I have received. It has made me more sensitive to the things I take for granted in my daily life, such as food, the ability to work or even the ability to understand the people around me. As a woman, an immigrant and a minority in the United States, I have learned, through this internship, how to represent all these groups I am a part of. Many of the clients I served are minority and sometimes immigrants who are limited in their English proficiency. CLS has done an outstanding job in working with interpreters to serve these members of our community. I have learned that community development is a key part of being an attorney. Here, I have learned to be involved in the community, to reach out to clients on a more personal level, to care just a little more. I was able to attend several meetings with advocates from around the nation who care about the poor and are constantly lobbying for greater access for them to legal services, for fairer laws and for more funding.

For me, I have learned to be humble, to throw away my biases, to listen, to empathize and then to fight fiercely for the rights of the poor using the rule of law as my weapon. I have learned that advocacy goes beyond an indignant cry for justice- it encompasses genuine compassion, perseverance, and a drive that moves through all obstacles, politics and improper policies. I understand only too well that my education is not a right, that my blessing can be lost anytime. I am even more grateful for the opportunity to be an attorney- a female, minority attorney. My opportunity will be used to create opportunities for others, to uplift enrich and nurture. I look forward to a fulfilling result-oriented career in legal services, serving the poor, enabling them to empower themselves and ultimately serving the same communities they have come from.

Emalohi L. Iruobe
Community Legal Services of Philadelphia
Summer 2009
Villanova University School of Law
Class of 2010