

August 22, 2023

Dear Dan Ruben:

Thank you for your support of my pursuit of public interest work this summer, and thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with you. My internship at Manhattan Legal Services was meaningful, impactful and educational. I am grateful to Equal Justice America for making it possible.

It was a privilege to work with clients this summer and to work with lawyers who value clients' experience and dignity. The Manhattan Legal Services Government Benefits Unit leads trainings for other attorneys on how to treat clients with respect. I helped to expand the section of the training presentation that focused on the history of welfare in the US. It is important to know this history because it is steeped in racism and classism, and our clients are largely low-income people of color. For instance, different states have different standards to qualify for SNAP because of the legacy of a New Deal compromise with southern segregationist Democrats; southern states were allowed to set up standards that excluded Black potential beneficiaries. Even today, much of the screening processes that shut clients out of financial benefits have their statutory basis in these New Deal era administrative structures (and looking further back, southern Democrats were empowered because of the end of Reconstruction and the implementation of Jim Crow, showing the legacy and meaning of structural and institutional racism). If lawyers do not understand the historical context, they can easily fall into blaming the client for systemic failures. Our trainings helped attorneys to avoid this pitfall and treat clients—who were already dealing with traumatic circumstances—with respect.

Working directly with clients was meaningful and rewarding. When clients were able to keep or expand their government benefits, their lives improved and they avoided catastrophic outcomes, such as losing housing or not having enough food to eat. We helped them navigate complicated government bureaucracies with byzantine rules that can be overwhelming even for attorneys. I am particularly proud to have assisted Spanish-speaking clients. The attorneys in my unit came to rely on me in this regard. In one case, a family with mixed immigration statuses was not certain whether they could apply for food stamps or cash assistance. They needed the benefits to survive, but didn't want to share the information of an undocumented family member. With the information I obtained from the client, the attorneys in my unit determined that there was an option for them to apply without needing to provide this family member's information. The family applied for hundreds of dollars per month in food and rental assistance. If they are approved, that money will guarantee food for their children and a place to live. Playing a role in that process is priceless.

Thank you again for your support of this opportunity. EJA's grant made a big difference and helped lay the foundation of a meaningful career serving the public.

Sincerely,  
Ross Levin  
Fordham University School of Law  
Class of 2025