

Dear Mr. Ruben:

The stipend I received from Equal Justice America allowed me to work for the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (LAF) this summer. I was assigned to work at one of LAF's neighborhood offices in South Holland, Illinois. This particular office served low-income and elderly residents in the southern suburbs of Cook County.

I had a wonderful experience with LAF. Although I know my career path will center on public interest work, I have not found one particular area that interests me, yet. At LAF I was able to explore multiple areas of the law all while working at one office. The range of cases LAF exposed me to included bankruptcy, divorce, domestic violence, foreclosure, public benefits, and housing law. I felt the staff and my supervisor were very responsive to any requests I made to work on a particular type of case and they encouraged me to explore and get involved in anything that interested me.

In the office, a large part of my time was spent calling clients to answer questions or interview them. Communicating with clients was challenging. It was difficult to get all the relevant facts from clients, to hear the disturbing details of clients' predicaments, and to tell clients bad news (e.g. that we could not take their case). In addition to working with clients, I drafted materials for the attorneys, such as interrogatories, discovery requests, complaints, and motions.

Out of the clients I interviewed over the summer, the one who left the largest impression on me was an elderly gentleman who came to LAF for assistance with a mortgage fraud case. The man, who had previously held a lucrative job, had spent beyond his means and fallen behind on his mortgage payments. He then fell victim to a mortgage fraud scheme in which he eventually lost possession of his home. As a result, he was working well beyond the age of retirement and was extremely embarrassed and confused. The man's story was not unusual—many clients had fallen victim to similar mortgage fraud plots—but he was uniquely relatable. He was grandfatherly, polite, well educated, and, at one time, a member of the middle-class. So often the public, and even attorneys, think of legal aid clients in terms of stereotypes: minority, poor, no education, and little or no job history. And with this profile in mind, we often view legal aid clients as “others”—we could never be like them. But this client defied all those stereotypes. To me, he represented why legal aid organizations are so vital: at any moment, I or someone I know could make the wrong decision, fall prey to a scheme, or simply have extraordinarily bad luck and need affordable legal assistance. This client reminded me that legal aid lawyers do a service to the entire community—everyone is a potential legal aid client.

My summer experience was highlighted by the opportunities I had to represent clients in court. Appearing in court allowed me to fully experience the legal process alongside the clients. I represented a client in a divorce from an abusive husband, I assisted a client and her infant child obtain a plenary order of protection from an abusive husband and father, and I helped a client obtain unemployment benefits in an administrative hearing. However, arguing a motion to dismiss on behalf of a client who was being threatened with eviction was by far my most thrilling undertaking of the summer. The client lived in a rental home in a suburban community with an ordinance requiring landlords to evict tenants on properties where crime or “quasi-criminal” activity occurred. The broad language of the ordinance extended to actions performed

by people who did not even reside at the rental property. In this particular case, a friend of the tenant's son (who did not reside at the property) was arrested for possession of a small amount of marijuana. After arguing against an experienced attorney, the judge granted the motion and the client did not get evicted. Winning the motion not only allowed the client to stay in the place that had been her home for many years but it also prevented her from becoming the victim of a bad city ordinance. This was a case where the outcome was distinctly measurable and the relief of the client understandably great. Taking part in this case was rewarding from an educational perspective because it helped me hone my skills as an attorney and from a personal perspective because I could see what a difference this victory meant to the client.

My experience this summer certainly helped me think about my career choices and goals. I found that I really enjoyed the congenial environment of the legal aid office. I also liked that my co-workers were excited about their work, felt driven to do their best, and cared about their reputations not only as attorneys and but as individuals. The variety of issues that arise in legal aid work is also something I hope to find in a permanent job.

Sincerely,

Christine Hammer
DePaul University – College of Law
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