

August 22, 2012

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the wonderful opportunity of working at LAF in Chicago. I worked as an intern in the Public Benefits practice group, which was an area that I had never considered prior to this summer. My work focused mainly on SNAP, TANF, and sometimes SSI/SSD. Through my work this summer I had the unique opportunity to have a lot of direct client interaction and truly help the poorest of the poor. A few highlights include a specific client I worked with closely, an opportunity to write to the general counsel for Illinois Department of Human Services, and a domestic violence manual.

Like I mentioned, I had never considered the area of public benefits before this internship. I am very interested in child welfare and quickly learned that public benefits impacts a wide range of clients, including families. I intend to dedicate my legal career to serving low-income populations and those clients most in need of my assistance. I was able to do just that while at LAF this summer.

This summer at LAF allowed me to directly interact with clients. A lot of my work consisted of following up with clients on the phone and interviewing clients in person. A lot of times, I was one of the first faces our clients would see at LAF. This was one of the most important and memorable parts of my summer. People that receive food stamps, cash assistance from the state or Social Security really do not have any other source of income. A lot of our clients could barely make ends meet. My heart truly went out to every person I met this summer. I wanted to do everything I could to help them, and I hope that I did. A few of the clients expressed sincere gratitude for the work that I did. It broke my heart to realize that very few people listen to our clients. Often times, we were the first people that took them seriously and wanted to help them.

I worked closely with one client almost all summer, and I know that I was able to make a difference in her life. She initially came to LAF through our Children and Families practice group as a victim of domestic violence. Due to the change in her living situation, she became eligible for SSI benefits again. Social Security Administration (SSA) gave her the run around because legally, she was still married. Through a lot of phone calls, messages, and persistence, I was able to get in touch with somebody at the local office. To complicate things, our client was deaf. When SSA finally scheduled an appointment for her, I made the trip to the local office with her as her advocate. Being in the local office was a truly eye opening experience for me. I knew that there was a general sense of chaos at government agencies, but this visit really solidified it for me. By the end of the visit, we were able to have her benefits reinstated. I successfully advocated that her Order of Protection, new lease, and letter from her landlord should be sufficient proof that her husband no longer lived with her. That trip in and of itself was incredibly memorable and rewarding. On the last day of my internship, with the help of one of the supervisory attorneys, we filed a civil rights complaint on behalf of the above-mentioned client. SSA had been refusing to provide her with a translator or had promised one but failed to have one.

Working with this client was incredible. By the end of the summer she also had a housing issue and we referred her to the Housing practice group for that. Unfortunately, she exemplified how low income clients often begin with one legal issue that spirals into

many more. Even though she couldn't hear the tone of my voice, she often saw my face and my body language. She saw that I truly cared about her and that I wanted to fight for her. I will never forget the gratitude that she showed.

Another highlight of my summer was writing a couple letters to the general counsel for IL DHS. Abandonment letters for appeals require a response within 10 calendar days from the date on the letter. I noticed that some of our clients' letters were not being postmarked for 4-6 days after the letter was written. This startled me, considering the time sensitive nature of these letters. If the client did not respond by day 10, they effectively abandoned their appeal. I brought this to the attention of my supervisor and her boss. The director of our group called it "outrageous" and fully supported my willingness to write to the Bureau of Administrative Hearings about the problem. Both times I wrote letters, I received responses that there was some kind of administrative error and that our clients had not abandoned their appeal. While it was a small "win" in a way, it was a great feeling.

Lastly, I had a special opportunity to work with my supervisor to compile a manual focused on domestic violence and public benefits. She was on the domestic violence task force at LAF and needed to put together training materials for the rest of the organization. She knew that I had a special interest in domestic violence issues and asked me to help her. It was really great to research all of the different exceptions in public benefits that apply for women who are victims of domestic or sexual violence in Illinois.

Overall, I had a fantastic summer at LAF. This letter hardly captures everything that I was able to learn and do this summer. Thank you very much for your financial support this summer. Without organizations like EJA, law students like myself would not be able to take advantage of great internship opportunities at public interest firms.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Youakim  
Loyola University Chicago  
J.D. Candidate, May 2014