

August 15, 2017

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Building II, Suite 204  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the opportunity to work for Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV), a nonprofit public interest law firm that offers civil legal assistance to low-income communities throughout northern Virginia. As a legal intern, my work primarily focused on assisting the Elder Justice Clinic at LSNV in providing legal services to older adults who have been victims of elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

Because of the focus on elder abuse, many of the cases I worked on involved securing protective orders for elderly clients. One of the first clients I helped assist was “Ms. A.” She was an elderly woman who lived alone but would occasionally allow her adult son to stay with her. Unfortunately, her son struggled with mental health and addiction issues and became violent toward his mother during one of his visits. The police were called and her son was arrested. However, Ms. A feared that her son would again return and hurt her, so she contacted LSNV to assist her with a petition for a protective order. We were able to walk her through the process and represent her at the hearing where we successfully obtained a two-year protective order for her.

“Mr. I” was an elderly client living in a nursing home who needed significant assistance with his activities of daily living. But because his Medicaid benefits were about to be terminated, the nursing home was preparing to discharge him for nonpayment. Not only was the nursing home’s notice of discharge defective in several respects, the proposed discharge location was unsuitable for Mr. I’s condition – his previous home was not wheelchair accessible and there was no one there to assist him with his basic needs. During the administrative appeal hearing, LSNV advocated for his best interests and emphasized the nursing home’s legal obligation to ensure Mr. I would be discharged to a safe location.

Many of the clients I interacted with, like Ms. A and Mr. I, are vulnerable in many respects. They’re poor, English is not their first language, and, because of their age, they may have physical or mental impairments. When combined, these factors make it incredibly difficult for them to effectively advocate on their own behalf in a courtroom. Thus, the assistance organizations like LSNV provide are invaluable to ensuring these individuals have access to justice. Yet, even with pro bono programs, the “justice gap” – the difference between the legal needs of low-income individuals and the resources available to meet those needs – continues to grow. According to LSC’s 2017 Justice Gap Report, 86% of the civil legal problems reported by

low-income Americans received inadequate or no legal help.<sup>1</sup> 'Equal Justice Under the Law' is one of America's most fundamental legal principles. Yet, our country fails its citizens when less than 20 percent of low-income Americans' legal needs are met.

Throughout my internship I learned the basics of trial advocacy. I researched legal questions, wrote memoranda, drafted advice and counsel letters, prepared trial notes, conducted client intake interviews, and assisted with witness preparation. While each of these practical experiences taught me about the specific legal problems low-income clients face and how to effectively assist them, perhaps the most valuable part of this experience was that it solidified my commitment to public interest law. True, the work is not glamorous and it can certainly be emotionally challenging. But, winning a protective order for a victim of abuse means they can live in their home with security. Holding a nursing home accountable to proper discharge planning ensures an elderly client will have a safe and effective transfer of care. For these individuals, the impact is huge. And, for me, the work is incredibly rewarding.

The support I received from Equal Justice America meant I could minimize my law school debt and focus on my work in this important, yet undervalued, area of the law. I am grateful to you for the opportunity to be your partner in the fight for justice.

Sincerely,

Carissa Peterson  
J.D. Candidate  
Class of 2019  
Scalia Law School  
George Mason University

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<sup>1</sup> Legal Services Corporation. 2017. *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*. Prepared by NORC at the University of Chicago for Legal Services Corporation. Washington, DC.

August 18, 2017

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Building II, Suite 204  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Re: Carissa Peterson

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am the internship coordinator and mentor at the Arlington office for Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV). LSNV is a public interest law firm that serves clients throughout Northern Virginia. LSNV is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, federally funded by Legal Services Corporation, local governments in Northern Virginia, foundations, the private bar, and other donors. As a public interest law firm, legal interns play an important role in ensuring we can maximize resources to serve our community's low-income individuals and families.

This summer, Ms. Peterson was an intern in our Elder Justice Clinic where she supported the Equal Justice Works Elder Justice Legal Fellow. This clinic focuses on providing high quality legal services to older adults who have been victims of elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Ms. Peterson was given substantive and hands-on work experience in this area of law. Examples of her assignments at LSNV include:

- Writing a guideline addressing the standards of capacity for specific legal transactions (e.g., wills and powers of attorney) under Virginia's statutory and case law. In that memorandum, she also summarized Virginia's criteria for a finding of incapacity in state guardianship and conservatorship law.
- For a client who sought to regain control of her social security benefits, researching and preparing a memorandum on the accounting responsibilities of representative payees and how to report allegations of misuse. Ms. Peterson drafted an advice letter to the client, providing her a step-by-step guide for removing a representative payee after hospitalization.
- Attending a workshop on bankruptcy, screening potential clients, and consulting with attorneys at a pro bono clinic held at the Capital One headquarters in McLean, Virginia.
- Successfully representing the Respondent in a contested protective order hearing at our intern mock trial held at the Fairfax County Courthouse. She demonstrated the ability to work well with members of her team and opposing counsel.
- Researching the current law regarding nursing home discharges, evaluating discovery documents and preparing trial notes for supervising attorney for an administrative appeal hearing contesting safe and proper discharge.



These are just a few of the projects Ms. Peterson was assigned. She also attended LSNV's task force meetings, weekly case review meetings, community outreach events for seniors, and observed several protective order hearings.

Ms. Peterson's work this summer was consistently outstanding. Her written assignments were well-researched, concisely written, and easy to understand. She displayed excellent communication skills both with her colleagues and with clients. She was a diligent worker and a real asset to the organization. As with many legal aid organizations, our caseload is heavy and our resources are limited. Ms. Peterson's efforts this summer allowed us to serve more clients than we otherwise could, and allowed us to provide more in-depth services to those clients. We are grateful for her work on behalf of LSNV and the underserved communities of Northern Virginia.

Sincerely,

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*justice for a better community*

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