

March 19, 2010

Dear Mr. Dan Ruben,

My name is Hillary Hansen and I worked in the Health Legal Services (HLS) Department of the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley this past summer. HLS is committed to providing legal services to individuals living with either HIV/AIDS or Diabetes in Santa Clara County, and who do not have the means to access the legal arena without pro-bono representation. While we evaluated each case on an individual basis, our primary areas of practice included landlord/tenant law, employment discrimination, SSI benefit appeals, and consumer law. While I assisted clients in all these different areas, because of the poor economy, the majority of cases we faced this summer were involving unlawful detainers and employment discrimination.

About 80% of the work I did this summer involved direct client contact. My most crucial responsibility was serving as an intake-coordinator and deciding which cases our department could take on and which cases needed to be referred out. I spent the first few hours of each morning speaking to clients over the telephone and in person to decipher what their legal issues were. I not only had to partition out the facts and analyze the legal issues, but also prioritize what each client's needs were. For a lot of our clients, legal assistance was just one of the many services they were looking for. I would start out each conversation asking the client to explain to me what their most dire need was, and if it involved finding housing, or employment, or medical care I would refer them to social service agencies in the area that could help them with those needs before we even started to talk about their pertinent legal issue. I found that if I attempted to ignore what the client really needed in that moment, and instead only listened to their legal problem, I would get a half-hour into a conversation and realized that legal services was not what they were seeking. For other clients, they were not in a place to move forward with their legal claim because they were more worried about how they were going to feed their children or pay for their insulin for the next week. One of the most important lessons that I learned while working in direct client services this summer, was that when individuals are facing a multitude of stressful issues, you can't ignore the client's other problems just because they fall outside of the legal arena. Many times I would discover landlord/tenant issues, or employment discrimination problems that the clients were facing just by listening to their personal stories, even if they had initially called to talk about the medical debt that was crushing down on them. I also realized how empowering it can be just to offer an attentive ear, because every person wants the opportunity to be heard.

In addition to client-interviewing and intake, I also performed legal research and writing when new and unusual issues arose. The beauty and difficulty of direct client services is that every day you are faced with unique and daunting legal issues. The work never got redundant or mundane because I was faced with a huge spectrum of legal questions and concerns. As my supervisor repeatedly said, "we specialize in everything." Some of the more in-depth legal research I partook in was researching legal tactics to apply Title VII protection to sexual orientation, as well as researching case law regarding landlords who impose late fees. A lot of the writing I completed included letters to clients with legal advice, letters to landlords and employers requesting reasonable accommodation, and informational memos listing and explaining important legal resources in the local community. I also spent a considerable amount of time summarizing what was going on in each client's case in our legal

database. I kept track of what specific measures had been taken to address the legal issue, and also what measures would be taken in the future. The legal database was the way that all the law clerks and supervising attorneys could stay on the same page regarding case updates, without wasting unnecessary time catching each person up. I also had the opportunity to meet with my supervising attorney once a week to discuss particular challenges, and HLS met once a week as a department for case review. This allowed us the opportunity to brainstorm about techniques, case priorities, and creative solutions, and it provided the moral support necessary to deal with what was often extremely difficult and emotional cases. Although I came to truly understand how emotionally draining direct client services can be, especially when assisting clients who are living with chronic illnesses, I also came away with an appreciation for how supportive successful direct client service organizations aim to be, in order to counteract this stress.

It would be impossible to generalize about the clients I worked with this summer, because they came from every race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion that one could imagine. I came into the summer thinking that “marginalized” populations have a particular set of characteristics, and what I learned is that our clients appropriately reflect the diversity of the society we live in. I think one of the equalizing agents of the clients I worked with was that each one of them was battling some kind of chronic illness, and chronic illnesses do not discriminate. I also came to realize that I was not all that different from many of my clients who, before they got sick, were pretty close to where I was sitting. It made me think about what would happen if I developed a chronic illness and had to face astronomical medical bills while also losing the capability to hold down meaningful employment. My father, who has battled diabetes for 20 years and had to go out on disability when he faced serious loss of circulation in his feet, would never have been able to maintain his standard of living if he didn’t have his family to support him. Many of the individuals I was helping get on SSI and SSA did not have this same family support to keep them afloat when their health failed them. For many of our clients, they not only could not support themselves, but they also could not support their children who were relying on them. Many of them made the painful decision to skip their medication so that they could pay for other necessities for their family.

One of the most difficult cases that I dealt with involved a 40 year old man who was living with AIDS, and who was facing an unlawful detainer in a home he had lived his entire life. In the weeks prior to his eviction I came to learn about the details of his battle with AIDS and about the family he was trying to support on \$800 dollars a month. His daughter had 3-week-old twin babies and all he wanted was to keep his family in the home he grew up in, and in the home that he hoped to one-day die in. It was these personal stories that some mornings just seemed to be too much to handle, but the irony is that I drew strength from the clients who were looking to me for assistance. Even when I had to turn clients away or refer them to pro-bono representation that could better help them, I came to a place of peace in knowing that our clients were some of the strongest and most determined individuals navigating the legal system. There is no bigger battle than fighting for one’s life, and when faced with obstacles threatening one’s health, the strength of the human spirit becomes glaringly apparent. My work this summer made me that much more passionate and convinced that I belong in public interest law, and that the impact I could have, even on an individual level, is unmatched by any of the other perks of working outside of public interest. Thank you again for your support this summer. It was an amazing opportunity that I could not have partaken in without your assistance.

Sincerely,

Hillary Hansen

# HEALTH LEGAL SERVICES

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August 13, 2010

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**Re: Hillary Hansen Summer Fellowship Evaluation**

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you for sponsoring Hillary Hansen with a 2010 Summer Fellowship through Equal Justice America. Hillary completed a full-time, 10-week clerkship with Health Legal Services this summer, and her work on behalf of our clients was outstanding.

Hillary began her summer by attending the Law Foundation's summer clerk training program, a series of trainings on substantive law and practice skills to prepare our clerks for a summer of working with our clients. She then spent the remainder of her summer as a core member of the Health Legal Services team, representing low-income individuals living with HIV/AIDS and diabetes in our community.

Throughout the summer, Hillary's duties included conducting client intake interviews in person and over the telephone, assisting with on-site coverage at a local diabetes clinic through our medical-legal partnership, and representation of clients under the supervision of Health Legal Services attorney staff.

Hillary's caseload was varied, and included housing matters, employment issues, public benefits and consumer cases. She exhibited maturity, compassion, and an astute legal mind throughout her work this summer. From day one, she was extremely professional while also exhibiting the flexibility and sense of humor that is sometimes necessary to successfully work in direct legal services. We were very sad to see her go, and greatly appreciate Equal Justice America for making this opportunity possible.

If you have any further questions regarding Hillary's fellowship with our office, please do not hesitate to let me know. I can be reached at (408) 280-2408 or [hilarya@lawfoundation.org](mailto:hilarya@lawfoundation.org). Thank you again for your generous support of social justice legal work.

Very truly yours,



Hilary Armstrong  
Supervising Attorney