

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

September 5, 2014

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I interned at Central West Justice Center (CWJC). CWJC serves low-income and elderly residents of Worcester, Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin, and Berkshire Counties. Their mission is to protect and advance the legal rights of low-income and elderly people in order to secure access to basic needs and to challenge institutional barriers to social and economic justice. I assisted attorneys in the public benefits and medical-legal partnership units. My responsibilities included interviewing and advising clients, assisting with administrative hearings, performing research and drafting correspondences.

Many of my cases this summer addressed public benefits denials or overpayments, and related to either Food Stamps or Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) – both programs are administered by the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). One TAFDC denial case was particularly rewarding. The client was referred to us when she was 35 weeks pregnant. She suffered from a mental disability, and had a special needs trust fund to cover medical expenses related to her disability. DTA initially denied her TAFDC because it erroneously believed that the trust fund should be counted as an asset, therefore making her financially ineligible. We were able to show the DTA that Massachusetts' TAFDC regulations ruled out the client's trust fund as a countable asset, and she began receiving cash welfare just days after she gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

This case meant a lot to me because the client was in a desperate, time-sensitive situation and we were able to ensure that the system worked for her and her child. The Massachusetts welfare regulations are difficult to understand even for someone who is fully functioning. Because our client's mental disability, she had great difficulty dealing with the DTA. Hopefully the Massachusetts welfare system will eventually become easier to understand and deal with, but until then legal services attorneys often need to get involved to ensure that people get the public benefits to which they are legally entitled.

The medical-legal partnership (MLP) unit collaborates with health centers in Worcester County. It functions as a generalist practice, and takes a variety of types of cases referred by medical providers. The MLP model recognizes that legal action may play an essential role in addressing a person's health problems. One case I worked on this summer exemplified this role. Referred to us by his community health center, our client and his family experienced health conditions stemming from their living situation. Their apartment had cockroach, bedbug and rodent infestations, a stove that didn't work properly, and a variety of other problems. One family member had to go to the

emergency room multiple times for treatment of bedbug and rodent bites. We helped our client collect evidence and then withhold rent in order to force the landlord to make the apartment habitable. We also helped our client move to the top of the public housing waitlist. The client expressed multiple times how he felt like no one was listening to him –not the housing authority, inspectional services or law enforcement – about his troubles dealing with a negligent landlord, and how it affected his family’s health. We gave him the services necessary to make his voice heard and to protect his family’s health. And that was really the main take-away from this summer. Legal aid lawyers don’t provide charity to their clients – rather, they are a tool for low-income people to use in navigating a society that too often makes them feel disenfranchised and powerless.

Sincerely,

Justin M.W. Sullivan

Justin M.W. Sullivan
Boston College Law School, 2016