

Mr. Dan Ruben  
Executive Director - Equal Justice America  
Building II, Suite 204 13540 East Boundary Road Midlothian, VA 23112  
October 17, 2015

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thank you and Equal Justice America for the opportunity to serve and learn with the staff and clients at LAF during the summer of 2015. It was a privilege to work with so many dedicated lawyers who have spent their whole careers in the service of people who get the short end of justice in the world.

I learned about issues that are very hidden or at least obfuscated in our society such as both sex and labor trafficking, prostitution, prostitution diversion courts and “End Demand” movements, and U.S. immigration policy for victims of violence and trafficking.

I worked with the Immigration and Workers’ Rights practice group, and most directly with the Trafficking Survivors Assistance Program (TSAP). Within these programs, I had the privilege of working directly with two clients- one who was a victim of human labor trafficking from an eastern European country, and another who was a victim of violence, and was requesting a U-visa. Both of them have very traumatic stories and so it is extremely important that LAF not only be able to help them navigate the confusing system of immigration, specialized visa applications (that require law enforcement certification letters), but that LAF can also support them in helping to find resources for their other needs at the same time.

The client who was a victim of violence actually lost her daughter to a brutally violent relationship. Our client came to the U.S. to help support her granddaughter, a U.S. citizen, who had just lost her mother. Our client does not speak English and needs a visa to be able to be present for her granddaughter as well as to participate in the hearings against her daughter’s murderer. Without LAF, and LAF translators, I do not know whether this would have been possible. It was a privilege to be a small part of this process, to walk with this woman, give her support as well as to help with her visa process.

Another client was a victim of labor trafficking from Eastern Europe. He courageously testified at the hearings of the men who had victimized him and so many others, guaranteeing that they would not be able to victimize others. At the same time, he put himself at risk, and his family members back home, and now, he cannot return to his home country because one of the mafia members is still there. I completed his visa application and file, including the supporting letter that details how his situation was considered trafficking under U.S. legislation. At the same time, I met with him, gave him support in the process, helped him get his driver’s license, and more.

Through the presence of summer interns, and through my own experience, LAF is able to reach out to more people and assist more people. Through the research that I did on labor trafficking remedies, successful civil damages suits around the country, and alternatives like truth commissions and restorative justice opportunities, LAF is also able to deepen its knowledge of the issues while not interrupting its day to day assistance of the many, many people who seek them out.

Because the line between being a victim of sex trafficking and being a sex worker is often blurred, we also deepened our knowledge about the benefits and risks of End Demand programs that seek to criminalize those who solicit sex workers instead of the sex workers themselves, as well as prostitution and trafficking diversion courts. I visited the newly inaugurated Chicago Prostitution and Trafficking Intervention Court, and in the end, wrote a report on the diversion programs throughout the country.

One extremely significant piece of my summer internship at LAF, which left a strong impression on me, is how few people are aware of this world of exploited labor, exploited sex work, and how incredibly invisible it is to most of the U.S. population (perhaps most of the world population). The next challenge is to consider how to continue working with these issues, bringing them more to the surface of general, common knowledge, in a manner that inspires change and is not simply sensationalist.

Thank you for supporting LAF in this work, and thank you for supporting me so that I was able to be a part of their work and learn new skills that will be applied as I continue my legal education.

Sincerely,

Heidi A. Cerneka  
Loyola University Chicago- JD class of 2017