

August 30, 2012

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

Dear Dan,

My Fellowship experience this summer was rewarding on both a personal and a professional level. I worked in Ann Arbor, Michigan for the Michigan Unemployment Insurance Project, which is headed by attorney Steve Gray. The goal of the project is to assist people as they navigate Michigan's unemployment insurance system so as to ensure that everyone who is entitled to benefits is able to receive them. To that end, the project takes on clients at various stages of the process, from those who are just filing claims to even a few cases that have gone all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court.

This summer, I worked on a variety of cases in different aspects. One of my very first cases involved a client whose favorable administrative hearing was being appealed by his employer. He called MiUI and explained his situation, and we offered to prepare a written argument to the Appellate Commission to defend the current decision. The employer's position was essentially that our client had voluntarily quit his position, and was therefore disqualified from benefits. I listened to the audio transcript of the hearing that had been held a few weeks earlier, and came to the same conclusion the judge had: namely, that the employer had not met their burden.

I put together a written argument for our client and filed it. Appeals to the Appellate Commission can take a long time to be resolved, but I was fortunate that their decision came down the week before I finished working. I was therefore able to call our client and let him know that his decision had been upheld and that his benefits were secure. He was incredibly grateful, and it was great knowing that the legal skills I'd developed in school and on the job had actually been put to good use and gotten serious results.

Another case of mine involved a woman whose employer claimed they had fired her for misconduct, thereby disqualifying her from benefits. After going through her documents and talking with the client for some time, it became clear that there had been no statutory misconduct, and that the employer simply had a grudge against our client. We agreed to go to an administrative hearing with our client, so I prepared direct and cross-examinations. Our client was incredibly nervous about what the hearing would be like, so I spent a lot of time explaining how the process worked and trying to put her mind at ease.

On the day of the hearing, the employer failed to make an appearance. Since the burden in misconduct cases rests on the employer, this was tantamount to a default win for us, but the judge allowed me the chance to practice my direct anyways, and then had some questions for our client himself. Fortunately, after the preparation we had gone through the week before, she was much more comfortable answering his questions and the judge found in our favor. The employer never appealed, and my client was therefore able to start collecting benefits.

This is not to say every case had a happy ending. Some clients called looking for help after too much time had passed to file an appeal. We were unfortunately obliged to tell them that there was really nothing to be done. One of my clients was unable to get a hardship waiver which would have reduced her restitution obligation because she was collecting disability insurance. We gave her what advice we could, but ultimately couldn't do anything else. We always tried to help everyone that called, but between our limited resources and deadlines for appeals and protests, sometimes we had no other choice.

All in all, working for MiUI this summer really showed me a lot about how the practice of law actually works. Getting to work with clients from beginning to end of their cases, and to actually get the chance to argue in front of a judge a few times, is not something every law student gets to do in school. I also found it heartening to know that my efforts actually got something done for an actual person. My work inspired me to choose my Note topic for the Journal of Law Reform this summer, and I plan on doing some volunteer work with MiUI during the coming school year as well.

I would truly like to thank you and Equal Justice America for the Fellowship, as without it I would not have gotten this chance to work for MiUI. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Nicholas Pietropaolo
University of Michigan