

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work in a public interest internship by providing me with a summer fellowship stipend. This summer I worked at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society in Petersburg, Virginia. This office served clients in Petersburg, Hopewell, Charles City, Surry County, Dinwiddie County, and Chesterfield. I was supervised by two attorneys who were both young and new to practicing law, but very knowledgeable. While working with younger attorneys may not be everyone's first choice, I found it made our relationship more collaborative and allowed me to learn even more than I would working with an older or more experienced attorney. This summer I did lots of legal research, I interviewed clients, and handled administrative and domestic law hearings.

Working with clients in Virginia was much different than what I was used to seeing in my previous internship, which was not in Virginia. In the Petersburg office I was exposed to many different types of law. While in New York the main focuses of their legal aid society were family law and housing, CVLAS's areas included family and housing, but expanded to public benefits and consumer law. One major difference in my summer internship experiences was the emphasis on domestic violence victims in the CVLAS offices. The office would not take a divorce or custody case unless there was some history of domestic violence. I thought that this was to slow the number of family law cases, but family law cases were a large percentage of the cases CVLAS handles. Unfortunately, there appeared to be a growing number of people who are victims of domestic violence. One case in particular involved a woman that was abused for years but did not come forward with allegations of abuse until she filed for divorce. During depositions, the question most asked by opposing counsel was why she didn't call the police. The woman's response was that they were married and she didn't think she could. This was very upsetting, because it is the mindset of many victims throughout the country; which can sometimes be made worse by cultural or economic barriers to the court system.

While interviewing clients and preparing protective order hearings, I also learned that to a lot of clients, the most hurtful form of abuse is emotional abuse. Often, it was very difficult to get the clients to speak about the abuse at all; but when they did, the most painful memories they recalled were not physical acts of abuse, but when their partner screamed and cursed at them repeatedly. A young woman came into the office to seek representation for her protective order, and she basically just wanted to make sure her boyfriend would not yell at her anymore. She

was visibly upset and there was obviously more to the story than just yelling, but it was what hurt her the most. Unfortunately, Virginia does not really have a remedy for domestic emotional abuse. It was very interesting to try and frame the law around issues of emotional abuse to fit the statutory requirements for a protective order. In that experience I learned more about applying the law than any problem in a textbook ever could teach.

There were other areas of the law with which I gained experience. I found that public benefits law, specifically unemployment compensation, was more enjoyable than I thought it would be. The clients involved with these hearings were more diverse, because during economic conditions like these, anyone can lose his/her job. Since most clients had already been rejected once, it was more about finding loopholes in the case law so that the client may receive benefits. I represented a client that was habitually late and was fired because he did not call into work on his last day. It was an uphill battle, but it was interesting to find that all was not lost and a few good arguments could be made on his behalf.

Overall, I enjoyed my internship with Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. It was hectic and busy, and something new came up every day. There were issues that I never would have imagined could really be a legal problem, and there was a great deal of pressure to research the issue and become familiar with it in a very short amount of time. But, I felt comfortable at that pace and would not trade the excitement that came along with the internship for anything. Thank you for the opportunity to work with CVLAS this summer.

Sincerely,

Sydney M. Avery

University of Richmond School of Law

Class of 2010