

August 26, 2011

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

Dear Dan Ruben,

It would be difficult to overstate the value of my summer experience as an Equal Justice America fellow. As a summer associate with Disability Rights California (DRA), I had an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of individuals with mobility, hearing, vision, and psychological disabilities. In addition to high-impact class action litigation, I was also able to assist several individuals with discrete problems – some of which were potentially life threatening. Here are some highlights of my summer experience.

What happens to one's wheelchair when ambulance transport is required to bring one to the emergency room? In my client's case, their highly specialized wheelchair was left abandoned by emergency responders in an impoverished section of a large city. Unsurprisingly, the wheelchair was lost. The result was that, not only would my client's \$30,000 wheelchair need to be replaced, but he would also spend four extra days in the hospital, miss multiple days of work, and find himself stranded on city streets and in his apartment on several occasions.

I was able to help my client by contacting the mayor's office of the municipality responsible for the emergency response to arrange a settlement meeting. Ultimately, we were able to negotiate payment for a new wheelchair and encourage the city to update and develop policy addressing emergency responses involving wheelchairs. The policy aims to become a model for other municipalities across the nation. As I write this, settlement is pending, a new wheelchair has been ordered, and the policy is under review in the city attorney's office.

The effects of mental health disabilities can create insidious obstacles for some individuals, forcing them to live on the fringes of society. Such disabilities might manifest as drug abuse. Sometimes violence becomes a means to an end. And prison can become the norm. Those who suffer from such disabilities are the people for whom there are few voices. Another of my clients fell within this category.

My client was multiply diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, anti-social intermittent explosive disorder, and depression. He also suffered from seizures and diabetes. Now sober, he began using heroin and crack cocaine at the age of 14 -- and his first incarceration came shortly thereafter. He met his father for the first time when he arrived in prison at the age of 18. Although my client has been working to overcome these challenges, the path is not easy. Services are rare, with participation fragile.

When one's last hope for resources has decided to terminate your participation in a program -- for the very same behavior that qualifies one for the program's services in the first place -- what does one do? For my client, the options were few. Without an advocate to fight on his behalf to get him reinstated into the program, he would inevitably return to homelessness. A return to homelessness would lead back to street life. Street life would lead back to prison. Prison would lead to death. Death because, in prison, his

diabetes would likely flare, his seizures would be left untreated, and prison life would require he return to old habits. The stress of being released from the program was clearly taking its toll on my client, which led to a relapse. And because he was viewed as the enemy, people were creating problems for my client, complicating an already stubborn problem.

My client was served an unlawful detainer notice, which we were able to successfully demur. Next, a fabricated restraining order was filed, which we successfully defeated. Finally, we were able to negotiate a two-week "cool down," enabling the parties to come to a settlement meeting and discuss possible solutions. The circumstances are not yet resolved, but the parties are moving slowly toward an equitable resolution. As it stands, the cool-down has been extended and an offer of program reinstatement is being developed. Because of the generosity of Equal Justice America, I was able to help at least one person come one step closer to avoiding homelessness and the very serious social implications such an outcome would have.

The structure of society can impact persons with disabilities in other ways. For example, can a person with a mobility disability enjoy a state park that doesn't have wheelchair access? What about a person who is blind, but wants to experience the beauty of our nation's parks? These were the kinds of issues that were resolved in a settlement with the California State Parks, and which I monitored this summer. As a part of the Park's ongoing commitment to improving access for persons with disabilities, I was able to accomplish solutions to several outstanding settlement issues. These solutions will have an immediate impact on the experience of persons who enjoy California's wonderful state park system. And, as a person who deeply enjoys the outdoors, this work was of personal importance to me.

This brief letter does not exhaust my summer experiences, but captures the highlights. My aim this summer was to gain experience in a legal field that interested me, hopefully by contributing to the world in a positive way. I achieved this goal. I also confirmed my interest in using my legal education to work in the interest of the public. Thus, I find it difficult to sufficiently express my gratitude to Equal Justice America. I will do my very best to remember this important time of my career development as I move further towards my future as an attorney. Thank you for the wonderful work you do. And I wish you the very best.

Sincerely,

Paul Pfeilschifter, M.A.

EJA Fellowship Recipient, Summer 2011

U.C. Hastings College of the Law, Juris Doctor Candidate, 2013