

November 6, 2009

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I worked at Farmworker Legal Services (FLS) in Bangor, Michigan serving the migrant farm worker community of south and western Michigan. My summer internship was fantastic in large part because I worked with an outstanding host organization. The attorneys at FLS were all committed, knowledgeable and professional people who took the time to be great mentors and teachers while also providing abundant opportunity for hands on learning.

There are over 700 licensed migrant worker camps in Michigan where workers—mostly from Florida and Texas—live while they are temporarily in the state to harvest several hand picked crops such as blueberries, asparagus, cucumbers and apples. Each summer, FLS visits as many camps as possible to provide legal aid and information to the workers and their families who are generally isolated from local communities and other legal service providers. My time at FLS was primarily divided between conducting outreach trips to migrant labor camps and working on individual client cases.

Several nights each week, another intern and I would plot out a route that would take us to five to ten camps. Many camps were within a half hour of the FLS office, but many were also hours away. We would arrive at camps and go door to door with FLS calendars that contained information about workers rights and Michigan laws. We gave out calendars and spoke with worker. The conversations went in all different directions. Sometimes we were asked about FLS services or about specific laws—like minimum wage, food stamps, driver's license provisions or immigration. If people were looking for help, we would conduct an intake interview to take back to the office and discuss with our supervisors. Other times we would talk to people about their rights as workers, or if the camp were in poor condition we would explain what the law said about how the farmer was supposed to be maintaining the living quarters. Many of the migrant workers were reluctant to complain about working or living conditions because they were scared of losing their jobs. Throughout the conversations questions would come up that I could help with or I would suggest other services that were available to help them. Building trust and educating the community were a constant part of outreach.

I also visited camps when we received calls or reports from workers about poor living conditions. On one occasion, a young couple and their two children came into our office looking for assistance because the recruiter who had brought them from Texas had dropped them off at a farm where there was no work and the farmer was renting the family a unit that had been

superficially converted from bathrooms into an apartment. They felt that the conditions were unsanitary and wanted to make sure that the farmer was not allowed to make other people live there. That afternoon I met them at the farm to document their living conditions. Their bedroom had a door that was sealed closed that would have opened to the outside of the building, and on the outside of that door the "men" sign was still visible. Their kitchen apparently used to be the women's bathroom, and the unit still smelled like a bathroom. There were sealed bathroom drains under the beds and several open drains and pipes where other toilets used to be connected in the bathroom. While I was in the unit, a neighbor flushed a toilet and I could hear the water running under the open drains and pipes. The couple used a small bag weighted down with garbage to try and block the odor emitted from one of the old toilet pipes. The unit clearly could not have passed inspection. Through a Freedom of Information Act request, I obtained the licensing documents from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and found that the unit was not licensed and that the farmer had not reported that workers were living in it. The couple did not want to take any legal action against the farmer; they simply moved away. FLS filed a complaint and request for inspection with the Department of Agriculture to prevent a new family from moving into the same conditions.

I worked with many individuals this summer to solve their problems, legal and otherwise, but I think the greatest impact probably came from participating in partnering with the Michigan Civil Rights Committee to investigate abuses of migrant worker's rights. At the request of the Civil Rights Committee, my host organization put together six civil rights hearings. My role was mainly to find members of the community to testify to the committee. It was rewarding to help people find a venue to tell their stories to people who could change laws and conditions in Michigan. I think the committee was moved by touring migrant labor camps and hearing workers stories, and workers were moved that they were being heard.

The thing I liked best about my summer experience was that I had an opportunity to meet and assist a community of people that are generally isolated and overlooked. There are hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in our country, yet few Americans know anything about them: who they are, how they live or how poorly they are often treated.

Thank you for supporting excellent organizations like FLS that are doing important work to protect civil rights.

Sincerely,

Gregory Crespo
George Washington University