

Farmworker Legal Services – 2007 Intern Reflection (Ruth)

One Wednesday afternoon my fellow intern and I went on what seemed a pretty routine outreach trip. Earlier that day someone from another agency had called to let our office know about an unlicensed trailer with a migrant family in it. So, we went to check out the situation. The trailer had some major problems and we discussed the circumstances with the mom there. We wrote up an intake form, took some pictures, left a calendar, and told her to call us if she needed anything. After that we moved on to our next assignment. On the way we stopped to take pictures of some workers weeding cucumbers – and their children playing beside the field while they waited. Then we continued on to a Migrant Head Start and set up a booth at a parent resource fair. We handed out calendars and answered typical questions about health care, minimum wage, immigration status, driver's licenses, and breaks at work. We got home before too late. It was another successful outreach in a beautiful countryside with wonderful migrant families.

The next day I was working on a research question that I'd been studying on and off for about a month. Work felt rather uneventful right then. But a few minutes before 5:00, the intern doing intakes came running into the office and asked if I had talked to X (the lady from the unlicensed trailer the day before). I said yes, and she told me that her trailer was burning down. What? Apparently as a secondary result of some of the problems we'd seen the day before, the trailer had really burned down, and not knowing where else to turn the mother had called our office – she'd grabbed our calendar as she ran out the door.

One of the attorneys and I hurried over. We couldn't do anything about the fire, but we were able to help the family when they most needed it. First, because we knew the full circumstances, we were able to ensure that the owner didn't blame them for the fire. Then, the attorney called the Red Cross and made sure they had the things they needed. And during the couple of hours while everything was being resolved we were there to translate and comfort the family. It made a difference to the mom that she'd seen us before.

This was a sobering end to a fairly routine outreach but it highlighted some of the lessons that were reiterated throughout the summer. First of all – interdependence is essential in this work. We relied on the report of another agency to find the trailer – and they relied on us to follow up with the problem. The Migrant Head Start fair that night was another example of the same – serving migrants in Michigan is a multi-agency effort.

Another lesson reiterated in this situation was the importance of getting information when you can about problem situations. You never know when it will become important later on. Another project I worked on this summer, which is in court right now, relied on facts that were gathered from clients two years ago. Those facts are essential now.

Also, be ready for anything at FLS. There are so many opportunities and experiences – the constant variety really makes life fun.

And finally, it's essential to build relationships with the clients. When they trust us they'll come to us for help and we'll be able to make a difference. Which is what I felt my internship at FLS was all about – through large and small acts, we as interns were really able to make a difference.