I wish to thank John Barrie, Chair of the Pro Bono Committee, for inviting me to speak to the Executive Council at the Midyear conference and share my experiences as a Public Service Fellow. I provide direct representation, community education and outreach to indigent clients at South Brooklyn Legal Services’ Brooklyn Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic. Since I began in August 2011, the fellowship has enabled me to represent nearly 100 individual taxpayers in controversies with the IRS, many of them immigrant workers. While each individual victory may seem small on paper, it is a crucial element in my clients’ struggle for economic security. I recently represented a survivor of domestic violence in a petition for innocent spouse relief. She had paid over $12,000 to the IRS for her abusive ex-husband’s tax liabilities over multiple years while struggling to support her children with a minimum wage job. Obtaining relief from the IRS effectively doubles her annual income, and enables her to move to a safe apartment where her ex-husband cannot find her. Often, resolving a low-income taxpayer’s problem can mean the difference between housing and homelessness, or covering basic expenses that may otherwise be out of reach.

I have also had the opportunity to train and work with grassroots organizations that serve low-wage workers, domestic violence victims, the elderly, and various immigrant communities. Forming relationships with community groups has been particularly important in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, which devastated many of the areas that we serve. I am currently staffing an outreach site in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, home to largest Russian-speaking community in the U.S. and one of the hardest hit by the storm. We are providing legal assistance to victims on a wide range of disaster-related issues, which includes obtaining both federal and state tax relief.

I want to thank the Section for recognizing the critical need to support public interest tax attorneys who can fight poverty through tax controversy work. Many funders and public interest organizations don’t fully appreciate the connection between taxes and economic stability for low-income families. The Section has increased the visibility for this work through its sponsorship of fellows. I myself would not have considered practicing tax if not for the fellowship and its clear support of public interest work. In addition to promoting antipoverty work through tax, the fellowship provides an invaluable network of experienced mentors, a range of CLE trainings specific to my practice, and a community of fellows past and present with whom to share ideas.

After my term concludes in August, I hope to continue my work at South Brooklyn Legal Services, where I envision maintaining a tax practice that focuses on low-income workers, along with disaster relief work and workers’ rights. I am happy to speak with anyone about the fellowship. Thank you.