

August 18, 2017

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

Dear Director Ruben:

I had the pleasure of working for Community Legal Services of Philadelphia in their Landlord/Tenant Unit this summer. The experience was truly awakening, and I hope that I made a difference in low-income Philadelphians lives through this work. The bulk of my work was interviewing clients, following-up with clients, and fact-finding for the staff attorneys. Because so much of my work was client interaction, I could further understand poverty and systematic racism's grasp on our client's lives. Additionally, I saw clients who were inspiring, and pushed me to continue my pursuit of public interest work.

Our clients in public housing bore the brunt of systematic racism and the criminalization of poverty. Over the course of the summer I saw many clients who were worried about eviction from public housing because of police activity in their block or complex. For example, one client called the police because of a large fight where the participants were brandishing weapons, and she was worried for the livelihood of her children. The Philadelphia Housing Authority soon after sent her a lease violation notice for police activity, even though she did nothing other than call the police because of fight she was not involved in. We assisted her in filing for a grievance hearing, which eventually led to the lease termination notice being rescinded. This situation, however, is not unique, and Community Legal Services' clients were often afraid to call the police for fear that their housing subsidy would be terminated.

Additionally, women constituted the majority of our clients, particularly single women with children. In the public housing context, many single women I saw were being brought to court, putting their vouchers at risk because of issues beyond their control, or circumstances that they were themselves victims of. For example, I had a client who was a single mother with a Section 8 voucher who was being evicted for damages caused to the property. These damages were entirely caused by her abusive, violent ex-boyfriend, and she had police reports and witnesses to prove it. However, Philadelphia Housing Authority was still attempting to terminate her voucher. Fortunately, we helped her obtain a Violence Against Women Act Transfer, however, without our intervention, many clients do not understand how to navigate the complicated system, and many lose their vouchers any way. The aforementioned issues highlight the way that the system complicates the lives of low-income Philadelphia residents, and the particular plight of public and subsidized housing residents. The people that we helped truly affected me, however I was saddened by the large number of people that we were unable to

assist, and had the possibility of losing their homes or vouchers. These experiences informed my perspective, and allowed me to better understand issues facing public housing residents, and encouraged me to pursue policy work that can assist this community.

Many private housing client's landlords miscalculated the amount that tenants paid previously, or were withholding bills from the tenant, which led the tenant to think that the landlord was demanding more than was due. While those issues were prominent, most private housing clients seemed to be dealing with horrible conditions, and landlords who refused to address them. Many clients came in complaining of health issues related to mold, asbestos, or lead. For example, one client had three young children, and lived in a house that required her to scrub the walls every single day to prevent mold from building up. Additionally, the bathtub was almost rusted through, the landlord was forcing her to pay the water bill for both units of the duplex, and refused to fix any of these issues. Fortunately, her landlord was in the wrong, and, upon realization, agreed to a deal for a move out date with no monies to be paid. Unfortunately, however, cases like this client's are not rare, and without representation she would be unlikely to convince the landlord of his errors.

Finally, I did policy work around the illegal eviction crises that is happening in Philadelphia where landlords are evicting tenants without proper court process. I wrote a memorandum compiling lockout laws and police ordinances from around the country to find ways to advocate that our local law forbidding such evictions should be stronger.

Overall, this fellowship rewarded and enlightened me. It allowed me to use my newly acquired skills to assist those in need, and assist them in a hands-on way. It highlighted the importance of both lending an ear, and being able to concretely help people stay in their homes. Further, getting the opportunity to work on policy for a fairer Philadelphia, and study the systematic issues regularly, allowed me to understand some of the larger issues that impact low-income Philadelphians. Finally, Equal Justice America's Fellowship allowed me to be able to do this work without any income to provide for myself, and for that I am thankful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Valero', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Stephen Valero

Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law  
Expected Graduation May 2018



COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES  
OF PHILADELPHIA

August 21, 2017

Dan Ruben, Executive Director

RE: Stephen Valero

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Stephen Valero requested that I write a letter of recommendation on his behalf and I am delighted to be able to do so. He worked as a summer intern in the housing unit at Community Legal Services for ten weeks during this summer. The housing unit provides advice and representation to low income tenants in Philadelphia. I supervised Stephen's work, which included interviewing clients; opening and maintaining files; advising clients; negotiating with opposing counsel and landlords; and drafting various letters to, and documents for, clients.

Stephen's work was very good. He acted professionally towards his clients. He clearly has good interviewing skills and was usually able to obtain all of the necessary facts during the initial interview. His work was thorough. He was organized and stayed on top of all deadlines. He was punctual and worked well with his co-workers. He was also industrious. He also performed a great deal of work, handling more than 40 cases.

I am convinced that Stephen will become an excellent public interest attorney.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or will require any further information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael A.', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael Donahue, Esquire