



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



**Name:** Ryan Trismen

**Law School:** Northeastern Law

**Organization:** Pine Tree Legal Assistance

---

**Update 1:** I'm very thankful to receive funding from Equal Justice America to help support my internship with Pine Tree Legal Assistance in Lewiston, Maine. At Pine Tree, I am representing tenants who are faced with losing their homes through the eviction process.

The housing crisis in the United States has pushed up rents and increased eviction filings to unprecedented levels. Tenants often do not have an alternative unit to move to, and often have to navigate a complicated court system alone.

I've seen the technical protections that landlords need to follow to properly evict tenants, and how difficult these protections are to navigate without an attorney. I've shadowed attorneys that are thoroughly empathetic to clients and zealously advocate for their needs in court. And I've seen how dedicated Pine Tree is to sustainably helping low-income Mainers. I look forward to becoming more and more involved in cases as a student attorney under Rule 90 of the Maine Rules of Civil Procedure.

---

**Update 2:** I have had the honor to become more involved as a student attorney at Pine Tree in recent weeks. I have represented tenants in negotiations with landlords and was first chair in defending a tenant at a Forcible Entry and Detainer (eviction) hearing.

Many of our clients are in impossibly difficult positions. Many are faced with an insurmountable back rent that they are unable to overcome given tenuous financial situations. Others are struggling to connect with case workers or medical providers. Some are being served with notices that do not require a reason to evict them, and they cannot afford an alternative unit in the current housing market.

These difficult situations come to a head at court, where the stress of potentially being removed from a home in nine days is a real possibility. Without representation, tenants often are not aware of the defenses available to them or the procedural steps that landlords are statutorily required to follow.



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

I am honored to work with others who accept that their job is to be there on these difficult days. To provide advice, assurances, or hard truths about each client's situation. Or, if necessary, to zealously argue their clients' cases in negotiations or before the court. As I continue my internship with Pine Tree, I hope to continue growing as an advocate and serve as a resolute and sturdy presence for our clients.

---

**Update 3:** I've had the opportunity to be more involved in negotiations with both opposing counsel and pro se landlords in recent weeks. Sometimes opposing sides are relieved to have attorneys in the middle to diffuse tensions or navigate familial conflicts.

However, there are many instances when either landlords, landlord attorneys, or even clients become outwardly aggravated, angry, or downright outraged. I cannot praise Pine Tree attorneys and paralegals enough who absorb this stress and take it in stride. Sometimes my blood pressure has risen as I've heard some of the words exchanged in negotiations, but it never seems to phase the attorneys that I work under. They never let anything get in the way of their mission – to keep people in their homes.

And how we view clients acting under the threat of eviction gets more at what our society considers to be a “worthy” client. It is wrong, and far too simplistic, to only put effort and resources behind clients that are level-headed and making “rational” decisions that we expect from our removed viewpoint. Would I make the right decisions all the time when there was a chance I would lose my home? Would I be completely calm if I was told that a lawyer couldn't help me sue my landlord for unlivable conditions due to capacity or funding constraints? No, I don't think I would be the perfect client either.

I hope to be the type of attorney that stays in the room and absorbs the stress of the situation that all parties are facing in these difficult scenarios.

---

**Update 4:** When an eviction case is hurtling towards a hearing that can have dire results for the client, so many concerns are racing through my head. Will I be a good enough advocate to understand what this client needs? Will I ask the wrong questions and miss a major defense or opportunity to keep someone in their home? Will I stumble at a hearing and miss an important objection?

Don't get me wrong, I have a strong support system at Pine Tree. I have supervisors and co-workers that are there to answer questions and to catch what I can't yet as a student attorney. I'm learning to lean on those supports and realize that there are few mistakes that can't be fixed.

But I've also worked to re-frame my perspective away from myself and remember why I am trying to accomplish this work in the first place. The clients. The people that are affected by bedbug infestations lasting multiple years. That face Landlords that illegally lock them out without going through the court process. That are met with verbal abuse when they try to assert their rights. That have a health condition but aren't being offered a fair opportunity to stay in their homes. That lose a home they've lived in for over a decade, not because of anything they've done wrong, but simply because the owner wants to sell.



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

I'd rather fuel my work by focusing on the injustice I often see in housing work, rather than my own fear of not being the best possible advocate.

---

**Update 5:** I am finishing up my final couple weeks with Pine Tree Legal, which has had such an impactful and inspiring effect on how I see my legal career going forward. I've practiced and developed a lot of important "legal" skills this summer, like improving the way I approach cross examinations, learning to quickly issue spot notices to quit, and developing compelling arguments for in-court motions. I've eased into negotiations with increased confidence, researched the overlap of federal and Maine law, and improved my client interviewing process.

But what I will also take away from Pine Tree are the intangible lessons that I've learned. First and foremost, I've learned to steady my nerves - to speak in front of the court with increased confidence. I am now a steadier presence for my clients. I have the mindset that if I don't immediately have the answer, I can find it. And I now realize that there are few mistakes that are completely unfixable.

I've come to understand that different clients value different outcomes in eviction cases. Sounds simple enough, but a client may be willing to throw away stronger defenses in exchange for a firm timeline of when they need to move. Others are willing to risk a completely unknown outcome for a slight chance to stay in their home, while others are somewhere in-between. I've learned to focus on making my clients aware of the ramifications of each of their choices, and to run forward with their decisions.

I've learned to avoid comparing myself to veterans of direct legal aid work and prepare accordingly. I know to come armed with tailored trial preparation for clients and bring folders of research and caselaw to help us pick up cases on the fly.

And there are many more that I could write about, but really my experience at Pine Tree has been defined by the clients I've worked with. For many clients, facing an eviction means facing homelessness. It could mean risking a move to an unsafe acquaintance's home. It could mean piling all of one's valuables into a storage unit that costs a considerable portion of the government benefits that the client had previously spent on food. And for the many that can't afford representation, an eviction means facing these outcomes alone, without an attorney to guide them through their rights. All the due process and statutory protections in the world can't protect tenants who aren't aware of their rights in the first place.

And that is where Pine Tree steps in. I had their support in helping their tremendously consequential work this summer, and I am eternally grateful.

Equal Justice America helps support me and students in similar roles. If you have the ability to donate, please do.