

August 4, 2016

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

RE : EJA Summer Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing to thank you for granting me the summer fellowship, so I could work at Greater Boston Legal Services this summer. I am so thankful to Equal Justice America for helping me to complete this summer of work in the public sector.

This summer I was a legal intern at Greater Boston Legal Services in the housing unit. I worked with Lead Attorney Mac McCreight. Working with Mac was a great experience, he is extremely knowledgeable in the field of housing law and a role model of someone who truly dedicates themselves to public service.

With supervision from Mac I worked on a few tough cases with a diversity of issues.

One client was a single mother whose paper work for renewing her Section 8 subsidy got lost in translation. Because of this her Section 8 voucher was terminated, and not much later she was facing eviction for non-payment of rent. The housing she had was extremely important to her; her grandmother lived down the road who was an important part of her life, her son had been accepted to a quality high school but without this address he would not be able to continue attending, and this was the home she had lived with her children and their dad before he passed away. Together with Mac I was able to do the legal research to assist in finding a way to get her Section 8 subsidy renewed and her housing secure. I looked into § 1983 claims, an incredibly confusing topic when it comes to housing regulations and a true growing experience in my ability to do legal research. She is happily continuing to live in her apartment now.

Another client, who was our biggest case of the summer was another single mother, fighting to stay in her home. She had previously worked with Greater Boston Legal Services and fought and won an eviction case. At first glance it looked as if she was confused by the outcome and believed that winning the case meant she did not owe her landlord rent. Though digging deeper with the client we were able to find out that at her new trial for non-payment eviction she addressed the court and let them know that she had lost one of her three jobs and was waiting on an adjustment from her Public Housing Authority; so that her rent was set at a realistic amount for her income. The judge ruled against her and in favor of the landlord.

Thankfully our client remembered the help she received from Greater Boston Legal Services and reached out to Mac for help with her appeal. Through the summer it became a puzzle of issues this client was facing.

First we found evidence that the landlord was charging her above the contract rent, a big no-no for landlords who accept Section 8 tenants. These were technically “side payments” that the landlord was taking from our client without authorization from the Public Housing Authority. First we found that she could bring a Chapter 93A claim to gain back the money she had given. But, not all the payments she made were within the statute of limitations; so I did the legal research to see how we could make our client whole again and we discovered the False Claims Act for the payments outside of the Chapter 93A statute of limitations. The client was awarded some of the side payments back, which was a win.

The tenant was also facing conditions issues in her housing which made her nervous for herself and more importantly her children. She spoke to me of fears about faulty doors and windows and what would happen once winter came around. I was able to help her navigate speaking with the housing authorities to demand inspections and repairs of the issues claimed.

I helped to put together the appellate brief addressing the issue that the court erred in producing judgment against her when she stated at trial that her inability to pay was due to a delay in governmental benefit (a Massachusetts General Law Chapter 186 § 11 issue), and I have high hopes that the issue will be resolved in her favor.

The feeling I walk away with this summer is the one I have had about all forms of public service my whole life. I have never entered a public service issue and not walked away with passionate feelings about it and this summer is no different. I see the issues in housing and can also see ways that they could be fixed but as is usually the case there is not enough money in the system.

If either of the clients I spoke about earlier had ready and easy access to legal resources they may not have ended up in the predicaments that brought them to Greater Boston Legal Services. On the other hand I see the lawyers and support staff at Greater Boston Legal Services and the organizations we collaborate with work tirelessly to help clients facing housing crisis. It is impossible to see where these folks would find the resources or time to do preventative work (although many do).

That is why this fellowship from Equal Justice America is so important. It allowed the staff at Greater Boston Legal Services some much needed help to address small issues on cases that they would reach eventually; but would have more time to do other work. I am so grateful to this fellowship and the work it allowed me to accomplish this summer.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Gobeil
Boston College Law School
Class of 2018