

August 26, 2008

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I was honored to have the opportunity to spend my Summer Fellowship at the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Harvard Legal Aid Bureau provides free legal services in civil matters to low-income, indigent people in order to ensure equal access to justice and help them to navigate the legal barriers to economic opportunity. Our primary practice areas are in housing law, governmental benefits law, family law, and wage and hour law.

I spent my Summer Fellowship working primarily in housing law, on private evictions, public housing evictions, and foreclosure evictions. My first major case was for an elderly woman who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, although she was understandably very proud and did not want us to lightly use her disability as a defense to her eviction. Her landlord, a condo association, had rented her a basement apartment for 7 years. The upper floors' apartments in her building were all privately owned condominiums. Approximately two years ago, the landlord was cited by the City of Boston for an illegal sewer connection and was ordered to make their sewage lines come up to code. A year after this citation, the landlord sent my client a no-fault notice to quit, terminating her tenancy under the premise that she must be evicted in order for the landlord to be able to comply with the City of Boston's orders to fix their sewer connection. After identifying a number of procedural defects in the landlord's notice to quit and summons and complaint, we were able to persuade the opposing party to negotiate with our client. As negotiations took over a month and the trial date was approaching, I got wonderful experience drafting jury instructions and direct examinations of the client and various engineers. I did extensive research on what constituted "good cause" for terminating a tenancy of a subsidized tenant, finding that while renovations constitute good cause, the landlord has the burden to prove that those renovations can only be done with a vacant unit. As there was extensive evidence that the landlord could have selected renovation plans that did not require our client to vacate and had instead selected a plan that allowed them to completely overhaul and convert the basement units into condos, we were able to convince the opposing party that we would win at trial. We negotiated a settlement agreement that allowed the tenant to stay in her apartment during renovations, which was exactly what she wanted.

My other housing law experiences included: negotiating a \$25,000 settlement from a private landlord for my client, who had been harassed by the landlord and had her

tenancy terminated in retaliation for reporting bad conditions and suing him for overcharging of rent beyond the terms of her subsidized housing lease; participating in the Boston Bar Association's Attorney for the Day program at the Boston Housing Court, where I was able to assist tenants in representing themselves in the courtroom or in a mediation session; and participating in the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau's foreclosure clinic, in which we sought out foreclosure eviction cases and invited the victims to a clinic where we taught them about their rights and helped them to fill out and file answers and counterclaims and discovery, which automatically pushed their trial date back two weeks, providing much needed time for the tenants to find new housing.

In addition to housing cases, I also represented a client in a Social Security Insurance administrative hearing and another client in his appeal for Unemployment Insurance benefits. My SSI client had difficulty maintaining employment and had recently been homeless for a period of months as he could not pay rent, all due to the effects of his paranoid schizophrenia. Working closely with two clients this summer who suffered from mental disability was a wonderful experience that helped me become a better communicator and moved me deeply. It is often very difficult to explain the legal issues in a case to an indigent client who may not be a native English speaker, who may not have much education, and who may often be too upset and angry at the situation to be able to listen. Explaining legal issues to a mentally disabled client is hundreds of times more difficult, requiring extra patience, frequent repetition, and clearer, more understandable language. It is very rewarding to help these people who would likely not be able to get relief from the legal system without assistance due to their inability to represent themselves. Even though we have not heard yet if my client has received the determination of disability necessary for him to receive SSI benefits, my client has repeatedly expressed his appreciation for just having someone to listen and help him, whether he wins benefits or not.

Thank you for providing me with assistance through the Equal Justice America Sumer Fellowship. The financial assistance allowed me to focus on my clients' trials and tribulations without having to worry about my own financial obligations.

Sincerely,

Britanie Hall
Harvard Law School
Class of 2010