

August 18, 2006

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II-Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I was a Summer Fellowship holder in the Equal Justice America program for ten weeks during this past summer. I worked as a legal intern for New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation (NOLAC), a non-profit organization that provides civil legal assistance to low income residents of the greater New Orleans metropolitan area. I was assigned for the summer to the Housing unit of NOLAC.

The Housing unit was an exciting and extremely active unit this summer. The effects of Hurricane Katrina, nearly a year after the storm, persist in profoundly disrupting the lives of New Orleanians. Perhaps nowhere have these effects been more pronounced than in the day-to-day decisions residents must make about how and where they live. For the lowest income residents, these decisions are invariably the most difficult. Low income residents who before the storm already faced a constrained set of housing choices are today further restricted by the decimated housing stock (flooding following the storm hit some of the poorest areas of New Orleans the hardest) and the subsequent, enormous increases in the area's market rents.

The Housing unit's work since the storm has been centered largely at the intersection of housing and disaster law. As a result, my work this summer has focused on helping low income residents resolve their legal issues while they simultaneously navigate various bureaucratic hurdles imposed by local, state and federal agencies in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. To perform this work, I have conducted client intake interviews and conducted related legal research, drafted legal documents and actively advocated for my clients as they dealt with FEMA and HUD.

In one example of my work this summer, I successfully appealed HUD's decision to revoke our client's Section 8 Voucher for failing to notify the local housing authority prior to her relocation back to New Orleans, a minor violation of the regulations. Our client, a mentally disabled resident of New Orleans, had temporarily evacuated the city following Hurricane Katrina. In the appeal, I successfully argued that due to our client's disability she did not understand the technical nature of HUD's notice requirement and that the local Housing Authority should have made a reasonable accommodation of her disability, in this case, reinstatement of her Section 8 Voucher after her return to New Orleans.

Throughout the summer I have been inspired by the courage of our clients' as they struggle to overcome the hardships brought about by such a large-scale disaster. I have also gained a new appreciation for the tenacity required of those who live at society's margins. Of all my experiences this summer, it is the overwhelmingly powerful, positive feeling of being able to help those who can least help themselves that will remain with me the longest. As I continue my legal education and move into legal practice, it is that ability and desire to help others that will be the legacy of my summer in New Orleans.

Sincerely,

Carl Duffield
New York University School of Law, 2008