

August 24, 2012

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My summer experience as an Equal Justice America summer fellow was unparalleled. I met inspiring attorneys with impressive careers and passions for social justice, and clients who astounded me with the resiliency, kindness and insightfulness many of our clients displayed in situations I had trouble fathoming when I first started. Overall, my summer internship has further solidified my commitment to a career in the public interest.

As an intern at Housing Works, Inc., in New York City, I worked with clients living with symptomatic HIV or AIDS (or at high risk of those diseases) and who qualified for Medicare. The majority of our clients were also people of color, members of the LGBT community, and had some type of criminal record, drug addiction or mental health problems—quite possibly the least-advantaged people in the city. Almost all of them were clients of HASA, New York City's HIV/AIDS Services Administration, which, while one of the better social services agencies in the country, still has a litany of problems. I met many clients whose cases HASA had accidentally—or simply wrongfully—closed, leaving them unable to pay their rent despite actually qualifying for the “generous” monthly benefits of about \$1,200 in housing, \$200 in food stamps and approximately \$342 in cash. All this despite the amazing organization many of our clients possessed, coming to each appointment with reams of meticulously collected documents they had received from agencies, landlords and courts.

I handled intake for one gentleman, “Roger,” who had received notice of a nonpayment proceeding against him. Everyone in his building received the same notice, addressed to John or Jane Doe, alleging that they (or HASA) had not paid rent for the last several months. Roger had only been there two months, while three months' rent was alleged missing, and he and his Housing Works Case Manager had contacted HASA and confirmed that the agency had indeed paid his rent for the months he was there. It turned out that another of our clients had the same problem, and the landlord—a corporation which used multiple names and addresses—was initiating proceedings against everyone in the building and then “finding” the checks in the rare instances that residents were able to make their court dates. Roger's case was pending when my internship ended.

One client for whom I did a great deal of research was a gay man living with AIDS who tried to find an apartment in the city. Numerous real estate companies in the city told “Martin” that they either didn't have anything available for people on government assistance programs, or simply didn't accept people on programs. This was in clear violation of the city's law against source of income discrimination. Through testing via another nonprofit and depositions, all of

which occurred before my time at Housing Works, it became clear that a major New York real estate agency clearly discriminated on source of income grounds. Indeed, this appears clear to the defendants, who over the summer resisted or flatly refused numerous discovery orders from a Southern District of New York judge. Much of my research on the case involved what we could do in the absence of the disputed documents, and I wrote portions of a motion for sanctions submitted days after I ended my summer. The real estate agency has refused to settle, and a trial is scheduled for October.

Another major client of ours, “Serena,” had been sentenced to drug treatment at a residential facility in the city. That center refused to let her dress according to her gender identity; made her sleep, shower and go to therapy groups with men; and ultimately kicked her out onto the streets instead of letting her move forward in her treatment. The direct result of these actions was that Serena, who had been exceling in her treatment despite the way the facility treated her, relapsed and ended up incarcerated, this time in prison. As of the time I left Housing Works, the center was looking to settle, but we had only recently relocated Serena in prison.

Other stories I heard evinced less obvious cases of discrimination, but were nonetheless heart wrenching. I met a woman who had been all over the country and in her forties had finally found the courage to admit she was living with HIV and the strength to leave her abusive husband. She came to the legal department after already moving to the city to take advantage of HASA, finding housing, getting medication and enrolling in Housing Works’ competitive job training program. I also met an artist who was nearing the end of his life and feared the state would seize his art collection, made up of gifts from important artists who taught him. He needed the kind of advanced directives Housing Works helps draft. Many people simply needed help with changing their names to match their gender identities, a simple process for a lawyer but dizzying for clients. The patience they displayed in answering the many required questions amazed me when they could have been so easily offended by being asked what gender pronoun they preferred or whether they had criminal records, and when they were forced to sign their legal name, despite identifying with another.

My fellowship was critical to my financial well-being this summer. While NYU did provide some summer funding, and I live in New Jersey to save money, New York City and its environs are astounding expensive, and I was only able to focus on my work because I knew I would be able to pay my rent. I came into this summer fairly certain I wanted to become an LGBT rights lawyer, but my experience truly opened my eyes to the importance of poverty law. My hope now is to work in both of those fields, helping people in a system that burdens them with multiple disadvantages. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Yours most sincerely,

Geoffrey L. Wertime
New York University School of Law, Class of 2014