

To: Dan Ruben, Executive Director at Equal Justice America
In Re: Summer Internship at Sugar Law Center for Social and Economic Justice

Growing up in Metro Detroit is to be under constant bombardment of the absurdities of a post-capitalist society: a landscape of empty houses, a seemingly innumerable homeless population, crumbling infrastructure, an underutilized workforce, and over 1/5 of the world's freshwater with thousands of people within a few miles of the shores denied access to it. This summer at Sugar Law Center gave me an understanding of how the law works and the power that it imposes on people. I've seen tangible harm caused to people through words codified by those claiming to serve their interest. Worst of all, I have learned what it feels like to stomach this knowledge and explain to someone in a desperate situation that the law is not at their service.

Sugar does work for social and economic justice. The law center specializes in worker's rights, civil rights, and combats both corporate and state oppression. The mission statement is broad; so we were able to serve people in many different capacities. My work was divided between dealing with Michigan's predatory Unemployment Insurance Agency policies regarding applicant fraud allegations and accompanying penalties; working on community benefits projects centered around Detroit's, wholly uneven, redevelopment; working on various parts of *Phillips V. Synder*, a lawsuit against state takeover of black and brown communities through emergency manager laws; and working with community organizations in the fight against the naked and unashamed austerity and privatization that has led to the Detroit water-crisis.

Recently, Michigan's unemployment statute caused the implementation of a computer system to retroactively check applicant forms for discrepancies between their filings and the employer's. An issue as simple as a box checked "laid-off" by the applicant while being checked "terminated" by the employer will result in the applicant being charged automatically with fraud. The hammer to all this is that once fraud is determined the state assesses a penalty, which is the amount the applicant applied for multiplied by four. In this way, the state is generating revenue off the backs of the unemployed. My interactions with these clients, who call our office in numbers up to 50 a day, were to do their intakes and lead them through an intentionally arduous appeal process.

Michigan's emergency manager law demonstrated further abuses of power toward our most disenfranchised citizens. The law allows for the state to take over all local governmental powers. In effect allowing the state to legislate, adjudicate, and execute policies at the municipal level. The state can cut city services; privatize public assets (like water); and negotiate, enter into, and nullify any contract of that municipality. It also operates on school districts; eliminating a community's ability to elect their own school board. All of this is done in the guise of relieving the fiscally irresponsible electorate from their local officials.

Facially, this law brings arguable validity. In practice, it is operated almost completely and exclusively against black municipalities and school districts. In Michigan over half of African-American residents have lived under state takeover. The state has effectively told its black population that it cannot govern itself and, through discipline, showed the way by privatizing its water services and allowing outside contractors to go into homes of single mothers with children, who have been paying higher rates than their non-Detroit counterparts, and shut off the water provided to their homes. The result being poor, predominately black, communities being at the mercy of "charities" and bathing their children in library bathroom sinks.

After the emergency manager in Detroit came the bankruptcy. Detroit would be allowed to no longer pay its obligations; including pensions. This excellent cost saver was coupled with

the announcement that the city's plutocrat, Mike Ilitch, would be given tax monies, credits, and incentives to cover half the expenses of his \$450 million dollar hockey stadium, while the stadium tax payers helped him build in the late 80's would be left to presumably be used as an expo center.

At Sugar, I worked alongside a former Michigan House Representative and community organizer, Rashida Tlaib, on organizing a coalition and establishing a footing for that coalition at the negotiating table for the proposed hockey stadium. Among the people's demands were the following: first-source hiring, incentives for local contractors, and green space and park renovation. Our project currently has no executory mechanism and is facing preemptive attacks by the Michigan Legislature. But still we press on.

My own personal project was working with the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition in their attempts to resist water shut-offs. Through this experience, I became versed in the language of debt and its justification of violence. Highland Park went under emergency management and during the period the city was not making payments on its contracted water service. The Detroit Water Department brought a suit against the city for the unpaid bills, most of which can be attributed to industrial customers such as Coca-Cola. Being faced with a judgment of over 20 million dollars, the city applied this language of debt to extract the payments from its depleting residential population. The community, which mostly consists of retired people, was at once hit with a water bill for a billable period of one-day that often exceeded \$10,000. When this is explained to communities not familiar with the dilemma, it is easily brushed off with the statement, "Well, if they had only paid their bills."

While working at Sugar, I learned that I am not the only person that sees the absurdities of our society and imagines the possibilities of a better world. I have also learned that despite the disparities between those with power and those that do not have it and the daunting magnitude of this problem; we can still resist and work to change the system. It is our perpetual duty to resist. As members of the legal community, we can have one foot in the world of power and another with our brothers and sisters who need so desperately to harness it.

In Struggle,

Holland Locklear
Juris Doctor Candidate, 2015
Wayne State University Law School



Maurice & Jane

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August 28, 2015

Dan Ruben

**Executive Director
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**Re: *Holland Locklear, Wayne State University Law School Student
Equal Justice American Fellowship Evaluation***

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Please accept this correspondence as an evaluation of Holland Locklear while working as an Equal Justice America fellow over this summer.

By way of introduction, I am Legal Director of the Maurice & Jane Sugar Law Center for Economic & Social Justice and of counsel to the law firm of Constitutional Litigation Associates. Our work at the Sugar Law Center is multifaceted. We provide education and advocacy in support of stronger worksite closing laws, minimum wage and overtime statutes, other worksite regulations, and various equitable community development rules. At the same time, we provide legal representation to dislocated workers, low wage workers, community groups, and others on a wide range of economic and environmental justice issues of broad public interest.

Holland Locklear began his work with our office towards the end of May and worked through August. Throughout, he showed a real dedication to pursuing a career in public interest law.

The projects to which he was assigned included issues concerning water shut-offs of low income individuals in Detroit and surrounding communities, suspension of democratic governance in financially distressed cities, computerized adjudication of claims for unemployment insurance by state agencies, wage theft and other employment law matters. Mr. Locklear's tasks included client intakes, attendance at agency hearings and community meetings, drafting of documents, and extensive legal research.

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Page 2

Holland performed outstanding work throughout the summer. On his research and writing tasks, he exhibited excellent research capabilities and sound writing skills. Notably, he showed an understanding that it is not enough to accept a surface analysis of legal doctrine and has the perseverance necessary to think through a difficult fact pattern and dig for an answer that addresses the needs of a particular case.

Mr. Locklear also had broad opportunities to interact with our clients and community members. He displayed a natural ability to speak with diverse persons. He is comfortable speaking and working with not only with colleagues and community advocates, but also with clients undergoing very difficult personal circumstances.

With increased exposure to both legal drafting and client interviews, Holland seemed to gain increased confidence in his abilities and thereby effectively convey his recommendations and opinions.

Most importantly however, Holland Locklear consistently exhibited a genuine concern for the welfare of our diverse clients and a deep respect for the rights of all persons. I feel confident that Holland will use his legal education and experience to advance political, economic, and social justice.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to host Holland throughout the summer. It was a pleasure having him at our office and a significant help in our work. Thank you as well for consideration of this evaluation and if you wish to discuss any of these matters further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

John C. Philo

