

October 1, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Greetings. I write to thank you for the wonderful opportunity that EJA assisted me in having this summer. I worked at Philadelphia Legal Assistance's (PLA) Consumer Housing Unit from mid July to early September. During that time, I answered the Save-Your-Home-Philly-Hotline and assisted callers with understanding their mortgage or foreclosure problems, in accessing housing counseling agencies, and understanding the city and national services available to them. In addition, I met with clients to listen to their mortgage problems and provide advice. Finally, I assisted attorneys in preparing cases they were currently litigating.

The Consumer Housing Unit generally represents Philadelphia residents who are below 125% of poverty, in addition to those who present other circumstances that compel attorneys to represent them (e.g., evidence of predatory lending, gross procedural defects in their case, etc.). The Save-Your-Home-Philly-Hotline is a relatively new city innovation, operated by PLA, to assist homeowners in accessing the city's Mortgage Diversion Program. That Program, created by the courts, requires mortgage companies to meet with homeowners in foreclosure before litigation goes forward. In other words, once an individual receives the foreclosure notice, they are eligible for free housing counseling services and required to meet with their lender before a judge prompts to try and renegotiate the terms of their debt. The Program has been identified as a model for other cities because it has saved many homeowners from losing their house to sheriff sale.

I spoke with many, many people over the course of my summer internship. Many individuals had never had mortgage problems before but because of a sudden loss in job, or pay cut, had fallen behind. Others were facing sudden overwhelming debt because they had just lost a salaried member of their home, were facing medical bills, or were overextended for other, unexpected, reason. Some individuals facing foreclosure were unable to access the regular programs because a deceased member of their home was the homeowner of record. Many other individuals had been in foreclosure before, had accessed debt-relief programs, but were still unable to make their mortgage payments.

One young woman I worked closely with was facing foreclosure because of a year's worth of unpaid mortgage. She had several small children, was a single mother, and was trying to keep her house. She not only worked full time but her children were receiving various forms of government benefits. Her case was unusual because she was able to pay her mortgage, had money in escrow to pay her mortgage, but was unable to get a repayment plan from her mortgage company. Because her mortgage was an FHA mortgage, we decided to ask for a partial claim. I helped her write a letter requesting the partial claim with the understanding that if the mortgage company continued to refuse to help her, PLA could assist her in taking legal action. We are still waiting for the outcome of that case.

Other clients I met include an elderly couple who called one day from the neighborhood Salvation Army. The husband suffered from some kind of mental incapacity and the wife had very little control in their relationship. They did not possess a phone, car, or any source of income. The husband had been paid under the table during his professional life and whatever money they received he spent without telling her. They were on welfare and food stamps but received very little. In fact, oftentimes the husband would use this money without telling his wife. They phoned on the advice of the Salvation Army after showing them their foreclosure notice. They had lived in the house for decades and had not paid their mortgage in a few years. Additionally, they were years-behind on utility bills and taxes. We had a lot of difficulty staying in touch with this couple but eventually were able to set them up with a community senior center. After listening to the details of their story, we determined there was little legal work we could do on their behalf. In other words, they would likely be evicted from their home. The advocate we located for them was able to set them up with a Senior Living Center.

The two examples I mention illustrate the range of cases that the Consumer Housing Unit encounters. Through my internship, I feel that I learned a lot about foreclosure as well as the city-specific innovations in place to protect low-income Philadelphia homeowners. More importantly, however, I feel that I learned a lot about the kinds of problems fellow Philadelphians are facing. The attorneys I worked with were terrific examples of dedicated public interest litigators and the paralegals I met were a fount of knowledge.

Thanks again for the great experience.

Best,

Jessica Chiu
University of Pennsylvania
Expected graduation: May 2010