

September 4, 2007

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I would like to thank you and Equal Justice America for providing me with the financial support that made it possible for me to work my first full-time legal position in public interest law this summer. As I had mentioned in my initial application letter, I am a non-traditional law student who wanted to explore positions at civil legal aid agencies, but did not have the financial means to quit my full-time non-legal day job to volunteer. Your fellowship enabled me to work at Legal Aid of Western Michigan's branch office in Kalamazoo, and provided me with an amazing opportunity to provide direct legal assistance to low income individuals and seniors in four counties in Southwestern Michigan. My supervisor was truly inspirational - he had nearly 25 years of experience as a practicing attorney in Michigan, and directly encouraged me to not only conduct research and writing, but to "get out into the community" to directly learn about its needs and the manner in which the legal system interfaced with and impacted it. For example, one of my responsibilities was to provide direct assistance to tenants at the District Court seeking legal advice during summary proceedings. One thing that astonished me immediately was the high volume of cases present and processed on what is essentially a "default docket." Upon further research and review of State Court Administrator's Office statistics, I discovered that there are about 6500 summary proceedings cases on the landlord tenant docket in Kalamazoo County alone annually. The number of evictions and "tenants at risk" for homelessness and eviction generated from that docket are extremely high, yet, given the nature of a summary proceeding, it is unlikely that many of the underlying issues that contribute to the social context for the eviction - high unemployment, lack of affordable housing, substandard properties that may not be registered or certified - are readily addressed in a summary proceeding. In addition, many "tenants at risk" we noticed, did not approach us when they received notices to terminate or quit which diminished the opportunities to encourage the use of alternatives to court proceedings, such as mediation or early utilization of community resources such as programs to pay back rent to landlords, to resolve the landlord-tenant conflicts. These observations motivated me and my supervisor to initiate conversations with various members of the local Kalamazoo Affordable Housing Partnership, a large coalition of social service providers, landlord organizations, local government officials, fair housing advocates and alternate dispute resolution service providers in order to explore the creation of a "one stop clinic" for all "tenants at risk" for eviction when they receive notices to quit and for landlords that are seeking

alternatives to an eviction in court. The goal is to reduce evictions and homelessness by providing a standing community resource to encourage the utilization and intervention of legal and social services early in a landlord tenant conflict. The most exciting part about this group is that the Chief Judge of the local district court, Judge Richard Santoni has agreed to participate in our meetings and is hosting the next working group session at the District Court this week.

In addition to this community work, I also had the privilege of representing my first clients. I represented one client at the formal hearing stage of a public housing eviction case. It was exciting to have the opportunity to apply my legal training in administrative law and poverty law to highlight the various procedural improprieties present in the case (they had not permitted the client to exhaust the grievance procedure as required by HUD regulations). I was encouraged to treat the case as my own and had the opportunity to present the opening statement, cross-examine and prep witnesses, and conduct most all of the investigation and initial informal discovery for the case. The other major case I had dealt with a senior citizen who received a notice to quit from his subsidized housing complex. Since we learned about the situation right when he received a notice to quit, we had time to negotiate with the management to try to encourage a resolution of the situation to avoid an eviction.

The experiences I had this summer were unforgettable and strengthened my desire to pursue a career in public interest law. Thank you for supporting these efforts this summer!

Sincerely,

Kathy Purnell  
DePaul University College of Law 2008