

September 9, 2017

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I write to express my gratitude for Equal Justice America's support this summer and to summarize my fellowship experience. I spent ten weeks this summer with the housing practice at Mobilization for Justice (known until recently as MFY Legal Services). Mobilization for Justice represents tenants in eviction proceedings in New York City Housing Court, administrative hearings relating to public housing, and affirmative litigation to enforce repairs and combat harassment by landlords.

As an intern, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in every phase of the client relationship, from intake, to administrative advocacy, to court appearances, to motion practice, to case disposition. The most striking lesson I took away from my fellowship experience was how administrative hurdles, bureaucratic lethargy, and a lack of institutional coordination combine to wreak havoc on a low-income client's life—and how the assistance of an attorney can be critical in resolving a web of intertwined problems.

One client, Ms. W., had moved out of a NYCHA apartment five years prior and relocated to the South to be closer to her extended family. Despite her timely notification to NYCHA that she was permanently vacating the apartment, NYCHA never removed her from the lease. Five years later, she was still on the lease. When Ms. W. and I first spoke on the phone, she and her three young children were in the middle of moving out of their home. Her Section 8 voucher had been suspended because the local housing authority was notified that she had a public housing apartment in New York—the apartment that she had vacated five years prior. She could not afford the rent on her home without a voucher. Now, she and her three children were homeless, while she was in the third trimester of a high-risk pregnancy. Ms. W. had tried many times to get NYCHA to remove her from the lease for her old apartment, to no avail. Ms. W.'s Section 8 voucher application was going to be shortly closed unless she submitted proof that she was no longer residing in an apartment thousands of miles away that she had left years ago. If her application was closed, she would once again be at the end of a long waiting list. I contacted the local housing authority, explained Ms. W.'s situation, and got her deadline to submit proof that she was no longer a NYCHA resident indefinitely extended. I requested her tenant file from NYCHA and strategized with Ms. W. about what other proof she could offer to the local housing authority in the meantime. Resolution of NYCHA's administrative error is still pending, but I hope and believe that Ms. W. will get her voucher restored and have a stable home for her family.

Ms. W.'s resolve and perseverance in the face of a Kafkaesque nightmare highlighted the incredible lengths to which low-income people must go to secure the basic elements of a stable,

dignified life. Even for a sophisticated client who understood her rights like Ms. W., legal assistance was critical because she simply did not have the bandwidth to confront an impersonal bureaucracy when she had so many other responsibilities and challenges.

Another formative client experience I had this summer was my work with Ms. N. For years, Ms. N.'s landlord failed to make essential repairs to the plumbing in her bathroom, causing daily flooding. One day, Ms. N. slipped on the water that had pooled on the bathroom floor. She injured her back and required months of physical therapy. She was no longer able to work as the result of her injuries, and she fell behind on her rent. When Ms. N. was finally better enough to get a new job, she assiduously saved to pay her arrears. When she had enough, she mailed money orders to her landlord completely paying off her debt. Tragically, her money orders were stolen from the mail and were fraudulently deposited by a thief. Her landlord never received her money orders and brought an eviction proceeding against her. Ms. N. filed a police report and brought documentation of the theft with her to court, periodically earning temporary stays of eviction. Eventually, she called Mobilization for Justice's housing hotline seeking assistance. I helped Ms. N. figure out why her application for emergency housing assistance from the city had been denied. When her landlord nearly doubled her rent, I retrieved the rent history for her rent-stabilized apartment to see if her landlord was overcharging her. I counseled Ms. N. on options we could pursue—filing a motion for sanctions based on her landlord's failure to make court-ordered repairs, seeking a rent reduction order based on the conditions in her apartment, and re-applying for emergency assistance from the city to cover the cost of her stolen money orders. Ms. N. seemed to like having options and a sense of control over how her case would proceed. She and I weighed the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy, and we spoke until she felt confident that she fully understood her options. She and her daughter had been at the whim of her negligent landlord, the thief who stole her money orders, and the company that issued her money orders and was taking months to investigate the theft. Ms. N. was not fully aware of her rights and the options she had before retaining Mobilization for Justice. Legal assistance both helped Ms. N. protect her rights and gave her a greater sense of control over her life. Resolution of her case is still pending, but I am confident that Mobilization for Justice will be able to help Ms. N. achieve a just outcome.

Thanks to Equal Justice America's funding, I was able to spend ten weeks learning from the housing attorneys at Mobilization for Justice. I developed valuable legal skills that will help me advocate for disempowered people as I move forward in my career, and I was able to help Mobilization for Justice further its mission to provide legal assistance to low-income clients in New York City.

Sincerely,
Liz Fisher
New York University School of Law
Class of 2019



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September 12, 2017

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Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing you this letter to tell you about our experience with Liz Fisher this summer. Liz was a wonderful colleague who demonstrated a real commitment to serving the tenants of New York. I want to provide a few examples of how Liz contributed to our organization.

- She helped a senior citizen prepare for a press conference as his case goes to the highest state court of New York and brought greater awareness of the arbitrary and capricious actions of the New York City Public Housing Authority.
- Performed intake providing essential information and made home inspections of potential clients to help obtain repairs.
- Wrote a motion for summary judgment so that our client could continue living in the family home once her relative passed away.
- Assisted with trial preparation to prevent a tenant's eviction.

This is just a small sample of what Liz accomplished. Housing Court is a chaotic place where hundreds of thousands of tenants face losing their home. For several clients Liz was the person they could turn to for information and help. Mobilization for Justice was glad to have her and appreciate the research, writing, and litigation work that is still having an impact long after her time with us has passed.

Sincerely,

Justin R. La Mort, Esq.
Supervising Attorney – Housing Unit
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