

August 31, 2017

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I am writing to express my sincerest thanks for the assistance that Equal Justice America provided me this summer. My internship at The Bronx Defenders – Civil Action Practice was more meaningful than I could have ever imagined. Working in the civil practice at a public defender office provided me with numerous opportunities to learn about and observe firsthand the interconnected legal issues facing people in low-income communities. Not only did I receive outstanding supervision and mentorship, but I also had the privilege of serving clients with pressing civil legal needs, thereby reaffirming my commitment to a public interest career.

One of those clients' stories stands out most strongly in my mind when I reflect upon my summer. The first was a woman I'll call Janet, an elderly resident of a Section 8 project-based apartment. When Janet's estranged ex-husband asked if he could stay with her for a few days, she agreed. Unfortunately, the police arrived shortly after with a search warrant, discovering contraband in Janet's ex-husband's luggage. Both Janet and her ex were arrested. Ultimately, the district attorney declined to prosecute Janet, but that didn't stop Janet's landlord from terminating her Section 8 subsidy and initiating eviction proceedings against her. Because of how procedurally flawed their eviction attempts were, my supervisor successfully petitioned the court to dismiss the eviction proceeding. Eventually the parties settled, with the landlord agreeing to retroactively apply the improperly terminated subsidy and to recalculate any rent Janet owed. In direct violation of the settlement, the landlord failed to apply the subsidy and brought yet another eviction proceeding against Janet, this time for nonpayment of rent—even though if the subsidy had been reinstated, Janet would have been at a credit with her landlord. When I met Janet, she was understandably quite upset and confused by the landlord's intransigence. To assist her, I conducted research, drafted a memo, and visited Janet's management office to attempt to clarify why the landlord had failed to comply with the settlement. Eventually, we were able to get the landlord to recalculate the amount alleged owed and to concede that they had not properly applied Janet's subsidy.

While I thoroughly enjoyed working on a case that involved both legal research and in-person advocacy, I think what was most meaningful was being able to be an ally to Janet in a legal struggle that had been so disempowering. I was grateful that I could be there to assure her that all of the landlord's insinuations that her irresponsibility had caused her to fall into arrears were nothing more than a misguided attempt to obfuscate their own failings. That was a persistent theme throughout the summer. So many of the systems that our clients found themselves ensnared in sent the same demeaning message, that the clients alone—and not systemic poverty and racism, not to mention their landlords' own malfeasance—were to blame for our client's misfortunes.

So much of what I appreciated about this summer's work was the way that it pushed back against those denigrating messages. Particularly in a forum like housing court where, until very

recently, almost no one had an attorney and pro se tenants found themselves at the whim of bullying landlords' attorneys, the power of having an advocate cannot be understated. I saw my supervisor consistently emphasize to clients that they were not to blame, that they had a right to fight back against their landlords, to tell their side of the story in court.

That is the kind of legal advocate I hope to be—it is, I think, the kind of legal advocate I have started to become thanks to my summer at The Bronx Defenders – Civil Action Practice. That summer would not have been possible without the assistance of Equal Justice America.

Sincerest thanks,

Ryan Mendías
New York University School of Law
Class of 2019