

August 22, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I spent my summer interning at Legal Services NYC-Bronx in the Housing Unit, funded by an EJA fellowship stipend. The unit focuses on landlord-tenant disputes, and they mostly represent tenants that are indigent, veterans, and/or elderly. While interning there, I had the opportunity to sit in on new client intake, participate in case review meetings, draft motions to dismiss cases brought against our clients, file new cases against landlords, and assist staff attorneys in court when our clients had scheduled appearances. In addition to more formal motion drafting, I also had the opportunity to meet with clients independently, write advocacy letters, and perform a supervised home visit for a dog hoarding case. I also analyzed foreclosure clients' financial literacy data, and contributed to an official report funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in my free time between tenant cases.

While I observed intake and case review for different staff attorneys' clients at first, I was quickly given a few of my own client cases to work on. Throughout the summer, these clients contacted me directly with changes in their cases and questions about the legal process. One client I was assigned to was an elderly woman with serious medical issues, who had lived in her apartment in the Bronx for 35 years. She was being brought to court and by her landlord and faced eviction for alleged non-payment of rent, despite paying her rent on time every month. After contacting the New York City Housing Authority Section 8 department, doing some document review and researching current housing violations with the help of a supervising attorney, we discovered that the client's longstanding Section 8 subsidy that paid about half her rent each month was suspended years prior, due to safety violations in the apartment that were never corrected by the landlord. The landlord was then trying to collect the government subsidy payment he never received due to his own neglect from his tenant, in addition to her timely tendered portion of the rent. I was told by the Director of the Housing Unit that this unfair and confusing practice was not unheard of, as landlords in the South Bronx were increasingly trying to evict their longstanding, rent-stabilized tenants any way they could, in order to get higher rent payments from new tenants, or clear out their old buildings entirely to make way for new construction and gentrification. Once the situation was explained to the client, and she elaborated on the unsafe conditions in her apartment that contributed to the suspension of her subsidy, we decided to move to dismiss the case, as she is only responsible for her portion of the rent, and file a HP complaint against the landlord, compelling him to fix the unsafe conditions that contributed to the subsidy suspension in the first place.

I drafted the Notice of Motion, the Motion to Dismiss, the Affidavit in Support of the Motion, and a Memo of Law for the non-payment case against the client, in addition to an HP Petition against the landlord for the unsafe conditions, with the guidance of the Housing Unit Director. I then accompanied the assigned staff attorney on two court appearances for the client's cases, and was told to take the lead in informal negotiations with the landlord's counsel, since I was very familiar with the facts of the case. Although, to date, the case has still not been completely resolved, the landlord repaired many of the client's apartment conditions since we filed the HP case against him. In addition, when the landlord's attorney finally files opposition papers, the staff attorney at Legal Services is going to move to dismiss the case with the legal arguments I have provided her in my motion and memo.

When my time at Legal Services was coming to a close, I informed this client that she should contact the staff attorney directly going forward, since my internship was ending. She seemed a bit sad, as we had kept in contact frequently as her apartment was being repaired, but wished me the best in law school and my future career. I have stayed in contact with the staff attorney assigned to her case, and she has promised to let me know how the case is ultimately resolved. And though I am no longer working at Legal Services, feel particularly responsible for the outcome of this client's case since I worked on it from its inception and it is particularly unjust, as the client had never missed a rent payment. I sincerely hope she gets to stay in her home of 35 years without having to pay a dime more than she is legally responsible for, once it is fully repaired from its substandard conditions.

While I only interned at Legal Services for ten weeks, I feel I received a varied and expansive exposure to the housing issues facing New York City's indigent population. Thanks to an EJA stipend, I was able to be compensated for this important work, and am motivated to seek other positions where I can help similar populations defend themselves against the injustice and the hardship facing them in their communities.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Costa
Fordham University School of Law
J.D. Candidate, May 2016