

October 7, 2016

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Rd.
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I want to thank you and Equal Justice America for providing the financial support necessary for law students to pursue meaningful work for the community. This past summer working with the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice had been a very educational and transformative experience.

Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice is a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating on behalf of low-income individuals and families. This is achieved through various avenues. The group publishes research, presents seminars, builds local coalitions within the community, and sometimes initiates large-scale class litigation. Although the center would like to get more involved in all facets of problems that affect the low-income population, it currently focuses on five areas: hunger, healthcare, housing, education, and economic justice.

For my summer, I was mainly responsible for the affordable housing projects because of my background in business and real estate, and assisted in other segments intermittently. Housing affordability had become an overwhelming burden in the last few decades for Hawaiian citizens. Housing prices (both purchase and rental) continue to outpace wage growth. Out-of-state investment constantly pour in increasing demand, while geography and legislation like the Jones Act keep costs of construction high and housing supply low. Compared to the rest of the nation, Hawaiian citizens spend a disproportion amount of their monthly income on housing related expenses. This has created concerning sociocultural issues. First, the newer generations either are forced to leave the island to seek affordable housing elsewhere, or dwellings meant for a single family are now housing multiple generations. Second, Hawaii faces one of the worst homelessness problems in the country. Third, income disparity continues to widen as those with capital and homes see their wealth increase exponentially while those without fall further and further behind.

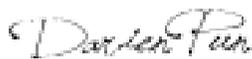
Hawaii Appleseed's goal was to find solutions that could either solve the affordability problem with legislation and policy. By the end of my eight weeks with Hawaii Appleseed, I was able to put together reports on: (1) inclusionary zoning policies and their effects on providing affordable housing; (2) how to improve the state's low-income housing tax credit program to provide more funding for affordable housing; (3) nation-wide survey on tenant application fee legislation; (4) the effect of representation on tenant landlord disputes; and (5) the state of Hawaii's housing affordability problem. We recognized that there was no blanket recommendation that could fix the problem

entirely. The strategy was to create a portfolio of smaller policies, which in aggregate would relieve the problem.

The projects were great learning experiences as they were both extremely multifunctional, and independently driven. I had the chance to conduct extensive legal and economic research, interview industry experts (for example, local developers and financial managers), meet local community leaders, and even perform financial modelling. With most legal writing and research conducted mainly online and through other academic sources, it was refreshing to have to reach out and speak with actual primary sources in the field. Instead of stopping where the existing literature ends, or being satisfied by noting a gap in the existing data, I had the opportunity to seek out these answers myself. Additionally, rather than engaging in theoretical recommendations that stem mainly from pure research, these projects provided an extra layer. The problem was a real one, and it is sometimes necessary to consciously remind myself unlike being a law student in a classroom setting, the answers I proposed affected real people. There is a need to get buy-in – just because a solution seems like the right one on paper, there is no guarantee that it is an acceptable one to the community. Similar to most solutions, there are also often trade-offs that have to be made. The costs are commonly justified as necessary for the greater good. This is easy to say until you meet the people that actually have to make the sacrifice, or in fact sacrificed, for the good of everyone else.

Lastly, beyond the more substantive and core aspects of my work, the summer in Hawaii in itself provided a very informative experience in discovering an entirely different local culture. The islands are truly unique, having undergone a very different absorption into the country. An insider and outsider mentality continues to permeate into the politics and legislation of the state. Meanwhile, the traditions of the island natives, and the different demographic compared to the rest of the nation, also provides a more diverse backdrop for the interactions between varying members of the community. Ultimately, this past summer at Hawaii Appleseed was a truly unforgettable and educational experience. Thank you so much for making it possible.

Sincerely,



Darien Pun
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