

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I spent my summer fellowship at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, where I served as a legal intern in the Landlord-Tenant Housing Unit. I welcome the opportunity to briefly reflect on this experience.

To begin on a somewhat philosophical note: I think there are two kinds of need in the world, natural need and manufactured need. Natural need occurs simply as an ineluctable consequence of living in nature and among other people: people will always get sick, get old; will always dispute with each other; will always seek some resolution to their disputes. There is a sense to which we are not collectively responsible for natural need. No mode of social organization will effectively prevent its recurrence. At best, society can be said to be responsible for addressing its symptoms.

On the other hand, manufactured need occurs as a consequence of public choices, be they political, legal, or economic. They are needs that need not exist. We can imagine a better world where these problems, through better, kinder social organization, do not continually recur. We cannot evade responsibility for these needs by dismissing them as natural, beyond the ken of humans to address: we all have a collective responsibility to fix what we as a whole have broken.

Most, if not all, of my clients this summer were in a need of the latter kind. I recall one client, a very religious older woman who lived in public housing and had recently taken in a foster child from a troubled background. The public housing authority required, as they do of all public tenants, that the foster child produce a birth certificate and Social Security card. This task proved more difficult than one would expect: DHS could not locate the child's paperwork. The client and the child's social worker reached out to the housing authority to explain the situation, but ran into bureaucratic dead end after bureaucratic dead end. Rather than find some equitable solution to the problem, the housing authority, in its wisdom, brought an eviction action.

When I interviewed this client, I was stunned at the pointless cruelty of her predicament. The client, who had made a good faith effort to comply with the requests of the housing authority, now had to confront two great dangers: that she would be on the street, and that the child whose life she was dedicated to improving would become once again vulnerable to the abuse and vagaries of the foster care system. And for what? There was no real benefit to the public housing authority to evicting the tenant. Rather, my client and her foster child had been caught in the intersection of two Kafkaesque bureaucracies. No matter who she called, no matter what she did, she could not break free.

Thankfully, my intervention allowed the client and the foster child to maintain their housing. I found a regulation that stated that the foster child could present medical

documentation in lieu of the normal paperwork. The child's social worker was able to provide a medical document, and the housing authority's attorney agreed to withdraw the case. While the client was ecstatic to hear that her case had been resolved favorably—I had never been told “God bless you” so many times in so short a period—I could not help but feel a certain hollowness at the victory.

The hollowness came from an awareness of the larger injustice at work in the situation. The client should have never been taken to court in the first place. If, like the vast majority of tenants facing eviction actions, she did not seek out legal aid, she would have been most likely railroaded through Philadelphia Municipal Court, either signing a lopsided judgment by agreement or likely losing at trial. She would have become yet another component of a half-forgotten statistic in the eviction crisis in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia Municipal Court at times seems to operate in a semi-mythical world, where low-income, untrained tenants are expected to have the legal knowledge of a trained attorney; where the cause of judicial economy outweighs the cause of preventing homelessness; where creating debt, desperation, and homelessness is itself virtuous. I recall clients who effectively lost their right to appeal because, while defending themselves pro se, they did not understand the technical phrasing of questions on an appeal form. I recall a client who, while representing herself, missed her court date to give birth, and was unable to open the default judgment—she should have given notice to the court, the judge decided. “Blind justice” indeed—blind to the obvious inhumanity of putting a young mother and her newborn on the street—without even a real opportunity to be heard.

I don't know why we've created such a system. But I know such a system, in all its brutality, is set up in large part to benefit people like me. Without the obscurity of law, untrained people might be able to actually effectively defend themselves in court. Without the elitism of law, the employment opportunities in the legal profession would be significantly less plentiful and remunerative. As legal professionals, if we do not actively fight, both systemically and directly, against the injustice the legal system creates for the marginalized, we are complicit in that injustice.

I am immensely grateful to both Community Legal Services and Equal Justice America to have had the opportunity to fight against this injustice. There are few needs more basic than that of shelter, and there are few responsibilities more daunting, more terrifying, and more necessary than helping another human being stay in shelter.

Very truly yours,

William H. Fedullo  
J.D. Candidate, Penn Law 2019



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

Re: William Fedullo

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Along with the other attorneys of Community Legal Services' Housing Unit, I supervised Bill Fedullo throughout his summer internship in our office. Bill proved to be a valuable asset both to the unit and to the low-income tenants he served.

Bill's duties at Community Legal Services included interviewing potential clients, managing his own caseload, performing legal research and writing, gathering evidence, assisting attorneys in pre-trial preparation, negotiating with opposing counsel and pro se (unrepresented) landlords, and accompanying attorneys at municipal court hearings.

Bill had numerous successes during his time at Community Legal Services. He provided cogent and compassionate advice to our clients, and was unafraid to passionately advocate for them both inside and outside the office. He provided valuable assistance to attorneys in cases before the Philadelphia Municipal Court and the Court of Common Pleas. Further, on behalf of our clients, he personally took the lead in negotiating several favorable settlements with opposing counsel and unrepresented landlords.

I am confident that Bill will soon make an excellent attorney. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Thu Tran, Esq.  
Senior Staff Attorney  
Landlord-Tenant Housing Unit