



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I'm in my final year of law school at the University of Texas. Right now, I'm doing a summer internship with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid with their housing team in San Antonio.

These first two weeks have mostly involved me familiarizing myself with what protections for tenants exist within both federal and state law. For example, I've learned that there are extra steps properties must comply with before people can be evicted from federally subsidized housing.

At the same time, I've learned that the laws governing eligibility and grounds for eviction for people living in federally subsidized housing are harsh and punitive making it extremely hard for people who need affordable housing to obtain it.

Another takeaway that I've had from these two weeks is the difference TRLA's legal representation has in the outcome of eviction cases. Without legal aid, many people have to represent themselves because of the high costs of hiring an attorney. Seeing tenants win with TRLA's representation in these court settings where landlords assume they'll easily win has been empowering. I'm looking forward to all I will learn over these next two months and being able to help people keep their housing.

Update 2: I've had the chance to represent people in court these past two weeks. While representing in eviction court, I've reflected on because of the white supremacist and capitalist foundations of property law, the law tends to not allow for centering peoples' lived experiences and hardships in court. For example, in nonpayment of rent eviction cases (where the basis for the eviction is not paying rent), courts first and foremost focus on how much rent money a tenant owes to a landlord while every other detail about why that tenant may be behind on rent or what the landlord has done becomes secondary.



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I believe when representing people, it's important to ensure that peoples' experiences become highlighted if a client expresses that it's important for them to tell their story in court, even if the law doesn't legitimize bringing up these inequities and injustices as a defense to eviction. I think that real change will come from outside of the legal system, but at the same time I think it's important for lawyers to not be confined to just what a racist system of laws provide. I'm looking forward to continuing to learn about housing law and myself these next few weeks.

Update 3: These past two weeks I have learned more about federally subsidized housing programs such as section 8 and how the program requirements/rules make it really challenging for people to keep housing benefits. For one, housing authorities are required to do annual housing inspections of apartment units of people receiving housing benefits to check that the unit passes all "housing quality standards." When a landlord's neglect is the reason the unit fails inspection, the tenants bear the worst of it because they have to move to a new apartment that will pass all housing standards and that will accept section 8 vouchers. This can be very difficult because Texas is one of the few states that does not consider it illegal discrimination for apartments to reject renters with section 8 vouchers.

Also, many people accidentally lose their housing benefits just for missing their unit inspections which tenants are required to be present at. Also, sometimes tenants can be wrongly blamed for a unit's failed inspection which can be grounds for the housing authority to terminate housing assistance.

I've learned disability protections under the Fair Housing Act can be used as tool in eviction defense by making reasonable accommodation requests to ensure that people do not lose their housing. For example, if a person is having challenges following a particular housing rule or policy because of a cognitive, mental health, or physical disability, the person may be able to request a reasonable accommodation to the policy/rule so that their housing assistance isn't terminated and/or to potentially stop an eviction.

One common reasonable accommodation request in both private or federally subsidized housing is asking for an exception to a rule prohibiting pets in an apartment and asking to waive pet rent/pet deposit for an animal that serves as an emotional support animal for a person's mental health disability.

Update 4: These past two weeks I've continued to help with defending people from eviction and handle some issues related to housing discrimination. Most recently, a tenant I represented in eviction court won their case which was good but honestly is the bare minimum that people deserve in these situations.

One major issue I've been dealing with is how people are often barred from finding housing just from their past landlord giving a potential apartment a bad rental reference. It's been crucial that when TRLA represents people, not only can they get the eviction dismissed, but sometimes they can get landlords to agree to not do things that will create these types of barriers.



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Overall, these past couple of weeks I've really valued collaborating with clients on cases. I think often attorneys get a lot of credit for the work, but people directly living and fighting through these oppressive situations not only obtain housing justice for themselves, but also for other people living in similar situations. I think so much of the work has been connecting with clients over a shared belief and value that housing is a fundamental right for everyone.

Update 5: I'm grateful for the opportunities to work alongside people facing eviction and losing housing benefits to win their cases during these last two months working with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid's housing team in San Antonio. I appreciated the meaningful, collaborative relationships I've built with clients throughout my time with TRLA. It meant a lot that people trusted me to work with them on their cases when there was a lot on the line. It has reaffirmed that I made the right decision in going to law school, and that I have certain skills like empathy and persistence that can help in providing effective legal representation/advocacy. I also appreciated TRLA's attorneys, paralegals, and legal assistants who took the time to provide support as I worked through housing cases.

I think that housing justice can sometimes be overlooked when thinking of public interest legal issues and law school curriculum. In reality, housing/eviction defense is so fundamental to the health and well-being of everyone because when people's housing rights are stripped away, there can be a multitude of collateral consequences that follow in addition to the immediate crisis of a family no longer having a roof over their head. In addition, housing justice legal work is complex and consists of fighting against layers of white supremacist institutions that function to deny housing to Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities. For example, the policing of racialized communities and mass incarceration leads many apartment applicants with criminal records to be automatically denied housing on the basis of past convictions. In addition, the rules governing the administration of federal housing benefits coldly do not take into account people's disabilities leading housing authorities to frequently discriminate against people with disabilities.

Moving forward into my last year, I am feeling confident that I have the skills to be an effective attorney. I don't know which area of law I'll go into after I graduate whether it be immigration, housing, or public defense, but I feel more confident in my ability to work through very challenging legal situations with clients while being supportive and valuing collaboration.