



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: This spring marked a whirlwind chapter in my life as I transitioned to a new apartment amidst a flurry of schoolwork, internships, and other obligations. Balancing the logistics of packing, finding a new apartment, and managing finances to pay for dreaded move-in fees felt like a juggling act. While stressful, this controlled chaos of leaving my apartment was something I planned for and expected. The same cannot be said for the tenants I have met through my time at the Law Center for Better Housing (LCBH).

At LCBH, I have encountered individuals navigating the daunting reality of eviction, often with minimal resources and under urgent time constraints. For many tenants, eviction looms due to financial hardships—job loss, health issues, or unforeseen expenses—compounding the challenges of securing a new home. The swift pace of eviction proceedings underscores the urgent need for accessible legal support, ensuring tenants facing eviction have the time and resources to secure housing.

Observing the fast-paced nature of eviction proceedings, especially for unrepresented tenants, has highlighted the critical role of legal aid agencies in safeguarding tenants' rights. Legal aid agencies are critical in ensuring tenants have access to meaningful legal representation when they find themselves facing an eviction to ensure the tenant is given sufficient time to find dignified housing. Legal aid agencies play a vital role in leveling the playing field and advocating for equitable outcomes in eviction proceedings, thereby contributing to the broader goal of promoting housing stability and social justice.

Update 2: The last few weeks at the Law Center for Better Housing have highlighted how the fast-paced nature of eviction court can be difficult to follow. While engaging in court observations, I have heard a variety of acronyms I did not understand. One of those being ERP, which stands for Early Resolution Program. ERP's goals include connecting unrepresented tenants with attorneys, mediations, and connection to other resources such as rental assistance.



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The nature of eviction proceedings emphasizes the importance of legal aid agencies, such as the Law Center for Better Housing, who participate in ERP.

This is underscored by the disparity between the number of landlords and tenants who are able to secure legal representation for these proceedings. Whereas landlords attend proceedings with an attorney approximately 80 to 90% of the time, tenants facing evictions often only have legal representation 5 to 10% of the time. ERP helps bridge that gap. Being able to meet with a client when they are facing an eviction proceeding to help them understand the complexity of eviction proceedings is vital. When clients are able to be paired with an attorney, the relief they feel is often immeasurable. With an attorney, they are able to receive advice or comprehensive legal representation tailored to the client's situation, that will allow the client to achieve their goals or plan for what may come throughout the eviction process.

Update 3: When landlords or rental agencies conduct background checks on prospective tenants, eviction proceedings are often included in these reports – regardless of whether the tenant was actually evicted. This is often due to “No Eviction” policies where landlords and management companies auto-reject applicants with a prior eviction on their record. The screening process does not take any circumstances into account. Even if an eviction case is subsequently dismissed because the tenant and landlord have been able to come to an understanding, the eviction remains on a tenant's record and impacts their ability to secure housing. This underscores the importance of tenants having access to meaningful legal representation throughout the eviction process. When tenants have access to an attorney that can advise them on the impact of having an eviction filed against them, they are in a better position to get these case files sealed. Even if the attorney is unable to take on the case themselves, the attorney can advise clients to request sealing if the case against them is dismissed. The current auto-rejection process is mechanical prohibition against tenants with prior eviction. If a holistic approach to a tenant's background was implemented, tenants could explain the circumstances surrounding the prior eviction proceeding which could open many doors in the housing market. Before comprehensive change is made to the tenant screening process, access to legal representation is vital to reduce the long-term impacts on tenants.

Update 4: Since my last update, my internship at the Law Center for Better Housing (LCBH) has shifted from observation to practice. In the last few weeks, LCBH has given me the opportunity to implement the skills they have helped me refine during my time with them. For example, I have been conducting client intakes, which are vital to gather the necessary information to help determine if a case can be accepted. Additionally, I have been able to lead negotiations call with landlord's attorneys, to help ensure our client's goals are met and a settlement proposal in line with those goals can be entered. As a 711 intern, I have also been able to represent clients in court. My court experiences have varied from judges expressing they have reviewed the submitted materials and ruling in court, to having to engage in 30 minutes of oral argument while fielding responses from opposing counsel. While the transition to in-court representation was a bit daunting, LCBH and my supervisor ensured I had the skills needed to confidently enter the (Zoom) courtroom. Overall, this hands-on experience has not only honed my legal skills but has also significantly deepened my understanding of housing law and client advocacy, preparing me for a future career in public interest law. I'm thankful to the support provided by EJA, as



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without it, I would not have been able to engage in direct-client representation or get a preview to what a day-to-day in public interest law looks like.

Update 5: My time at the Law Center for Better Housing has been pivotal in shaping my perception that housing is a fundamental human right and the important role legal aid plays in safeguarding that right. Throughout the summer, I have observed the representation gap between landlords and private tenants in eviction proceedings, where tenants are often left scrambling to understand the whirlwind of information presented to them at a deeply traumatic time. With the help of Equal Justice America, I was able to help bridge that gap and provide pivotal guidance and advocacy to vulnerable individuals navigating the complex eviction process.

Legal aid agencies such as the Law Center for Better Housing serve as indispensable resources, offering crucial assistance and representation to empower tenants in defending their rights effectively, who may otherwise be unable to access legal representation. This is especially true of the Law Center for Better Housing, which prioritizes their representation of private tenants, ensuring all Chicago renters have access to meaningful legal representation. Their commitment to addressing these needs helps to correct the imbalance in legal representation and ensures that justice is not out of reach for those who need it most.

Looking ahead, my commitment to advocating for housing rights and social justice in the realm of public interest is unwavering. I am dedicated to leveraging my legal education and experiences to address housing disparities, advocate for clearer eviction processes, and ensure fair treatment for the most marginalized in our society. By raising awareness of housing rights and advocating for equitable access to legal representation, I aspire to contribute to the creation of a more just and compassionate society where everyone can enjoy the security and dignity of stable housing. I would like to thank Equal Justice America for their generous support this summer, as it not only facilitated my engagement in this crucial work at the Law Center for Better Housing but also ensured financial stability during this meaningful endeavor.