

## JESSE DANIELS

(he/him) | Brooklyn, NY

Dan Ruben, Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
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Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Dan Ruben:

This summer, I worked with Housing Works' legal department, contributing to impact litigation on HIV/AIDS, homelessness, public benefits, disability, housing, and gender discrimination, while also supporting client legal services. Housing Works was founded in 1990 during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis to address the housing deficit for unhoused individuals living with HIV/AIDS in NYC. The organization emerged from ACT UP's Housing Committee, focusing on advocacy and direct action for LGBTQ individuals and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). Over the past 20 years, Housing Works attorneys have successfully led litigation on various civil rights issues, while also providing civil legal services to participants in healthcare, substance use programs, mental health services, and supportive housing. Learning this history on my first day at Housing Works and how they still are an organization buoyed by direct action, community organizing, and showing up for their members grounded me in my work as an intern.

I had the opportunity to work with a Housing Works client seeking to update her gender marker on various legal documents. Initially, the legal team was unsure if they could take her case. However, because of my prior work experience with name change and gender marker updates, I and another staff attorney were able to collaborate on assisting her. While she had already completed the legal name change process, she was unsure about how to go about updating her gender marker on her out-of-state birth certificate, her out-of-state driver's license, her Social Security card, or how to acquire a passport. All bureaucratic and tedious processes in and of themselves, it was complicated by the prior transphobia she had faced when she attempted these updates herself years prior. For example, she had been publicly humiliated by a DMV worker who questioned her inappropriately about being transgender. I researched the requirements for updating her Georgia birth certificate, contacted Atlanta agencies for information, and provided her with a detailed guide for navigating the processes for her various documents. Working with her highlighted how TGNC individuals often face unnecessary

complications in routine interactions with administrative agencies due to discrimination and bias. We spent multiple meetings reviewing each document, game-planning the next steps, and practicing how she could navigate these administrative systems. It's this sort of support as well as demystification of administrative systems and legal processes that fuels my desire to be a civil legal service attorney for LGBTQ folks.

In support of their impact litigation efforts, I drafted a legal memorandum concerning a source of income discrimination case Housing Works was bringing on behalf of a client with the Legal Aid Society of Chicago. I learned that the Illinois legislature recently became one of 26 states that amended their Human Rights Act to include source of income discrimination protections in housing contexts. The case involved a single Black mother of three who was denied the opportunity to rent a home using her Section 8 voucher. The landlord claimed they were "not approved for Section 8 subsidies", forcing the family into a less suitable apartment. This alternative apartment lacked outdoor space, which was critical for one of her children, who has autism and needed outdoor access. The landlord raised an affirmative defense that the client failed to mitigate damages, barring her from recovering any. While researching relevant case law to assess the legitimacy of this affirmative defense, I was particularly struck by how the injustice affected the family, compounding the harms of racial and disability discrimination. This case highlighted the emotional and mental damage caused by source of income discrimination and its intersection with other forms of inequality.

For me, public interest lawyering is a tangible way of reckoning with the failures and pitfalls created by imperfect legal and social systems that often exacerbate inequality, fuel violence, and impact community members based on their identities. As a law student aspiring to serve LGBTQ people and PLWHA through civil legal services, my experience at Housing Works underscored the importance of legal advocacy as a tool for addressing injustice and harm. Thanks to the support of Equal Justice America, I was able to contribute to these efforts, which reaffirmed my commitment to using the law to fight for marginalized individuals.

Jesse Daniels

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