

Equal Justice America  
Summer Reflection Letter  
Dan Ruben  
Executive Director

Dear Dan Ruben,

I am writing to reflect on my amazing experience working at Brooklyn Legal Services in the Foreclosure Prevention Practice.

This summer, I interned at Brooklyn Legal Services in their Homeowner Rights Practice within their Neighborhood Economic Justice Project. The experience gave me insight into the history of reverse redlining in Brooklyn and the connection between racially discriminatory lending practices and the 2008 financial crisis. I worked on some HUD testing, drafting complaints for foreclosure-related actions, and legal research. My favorite project included legal research as part of affirmative litigation challenging water shutoffs in New York City.

Working on the water shutoff project was very dynamic because I got to work on portions of a complaint from initiation to submission on a very fast paced timeline. The week I joined BLS, a team of attorneys were convening to initiate the litigation. On my very first day I was put on a strategy call about the case. The project was born out of the needs of clients already at BLS. Several clients in the foreclosure practice had received water shutoff notices, threatening to terminate their water service. The BLS team evaluated the notices and sought to take affirmative action for relief that would impact the broader population affected across the city. As the team started drafting the complaint, there were several potential legal arguments on the table to build out.

My first assignment involved investigating a potential claim – whether the water shutoffs violated the right to water established in the New York State Constitution. The research was based on a relatively new amendment to the NY State Constitution codifying the right to “clean air and water and a healthful environment.” This was an exciting project for me because it was my first real research assignment out of the Legal Practice Skills setting. I also got to conduct novel research on an affirmative right – something I am interested in more broadly.

Through the experience, I observed how a case moves forward even if one legal argument falls through. There were several other due process claims still potent for the complaint. As we moved into the next stage of drafting, I took up a research task investigating the proper preliminary injunction standard for our case. Due to time sensitivity of the case, the legal research was fast moving and dynamic. Sometimes things that seemed unimportant become critical. By the end of the summer the complaint was filed, and our preliminary injunction granted. The most important task – protecting our clients from immediate harm – was successful.

This was just one of the many projects I got to assist on during the summer. I additionally joined a Foreclosure Prevention Task Force meeting, attended an outreach event on behalf of the LGBTQ+ Project, and attended many interdepartmental trainings at Brooklyn Legal Services. I got to work in an extremely diverse and thoughtful environment, with attorneys dedicated to creating equity through law, advocacy, and outreach.

Watching the collaborative, dedicated, and innovative approach of the BLS team, I hope to bring these qualities into my work as a lawyer. I loved the attention to the clients' real needs and ability to maintain sight of the goal. I want to work in movement law and focus on creating systemic change alongside grassroots partners. BLS's work demonstrates how civil legal aid organizations are a part of that work. I am extremely grateful to EJA for helping to make this work feasible through summer funding. With the momentum of my EJA fellowship this summer, I am externing at the New Economy Project this Fall to continue working on economic justice legal issues.

With Sincere Gratitude,  
Sophia Heisman-Gibbons  
University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, '26