

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
3007 E. Boundary Terrace, Suite 201  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Dan Ruben,

This past summer, I had the privilege of working in the Housing Unit at the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC), where I worked with tenants in their eviction cases and overall tenants' rights. I would not be able to afford this experience without the help of the EJA fellowship. With the help of the fellowship, I was able to have an experience that changed my life, pivoting my career trajectory, and it made me extremely excited to stay in this field for the rest of my career. My work centered around client-facing responsibilities, including representing tenants in eviction proceedings, providing legal advice on habitability or harassment issues, and negotiating with landlords at Mandatory Settlement Conferences at the courthouse in Hayward. The hands-on nature of the work allowed me to engage deeply with clients, while also developing the practical legal skills that will serve me throughout my career.

The most fulfilling part of my internship was being able to have direct interaction with tenants who were at risk of losing their homes. Toward the end of my internship, I worked on a really complicated Berkeley Rent Board Petition, where the client was being steamrolled by their landlord and was forced to live in a home that was contaminated by lead dust and mold. I worked extremely hard on her case, and because housing cases move extremely quickly, I wrote a 23-page brief in two days. Working directly with her through her case and eventually facing her landlords in the hearing was extremely fulfilling and eye-opening in seeing how the rent board hearings operate.

One of the most impactful aspects of my work at EBCLC was participating in the courthouse clinics. On every other Wednesday, the housing team went to the Hayward court to assist any non-represented tenants in their settlement conferences with their landlords. I worked with two the three clients for the full day, negotiating back and forth with the landlord and my client to find a way to prevent an eviction on my client's record. These negotiations were extremely fast paced and high volume. If we did not settle, the client would be forced to go to trial completely unrepresented. I had to quickly assess the legal issues, consider the client's personal situation, and negotiate a favorable outcome. It was a balancing act—on one hand, protecting the client's rights and on the other, recognizing the practical realities they faced. This often meant advocating for reduced rent payments or extended move-out dates. We made sure every settlement agreement included masking eviction records. I had to think on my feet, remain composed under pressure, and present creative solutions that would protect my client's interests

while also offering terms that landlords would accept. This experience sharpened my negotiation skills, teaching me how to advocate effectively, even when the odds seemed stacked against my clients. It also gave me insight into the strategies and motivations of opposing counsel, which will be invaluable as I continue my legal career.

Beyond the technical skills, my time at EBCLC deepened my understanding of the broader social and economic issues surrounding housing instability. The clients I worked with were often part of communities that have been historically marginalized and underserved, and their housing challenges were not just legal problems but the result of systemic inequities. Many of the tenants I represented were people of color, elderly, or individuals with disabilities. For them, housing instability intertwined with other issues such as employment insecurity, access to healthcare, and social discrimination. I have always studied that this is the case, but being able to work directly with clients who are at the brunt of systemic oppression further lit my fire to continue this work for the rest of my life.

The impact of my work was made clear in the tangible results we achieved for clients. On several occasions, I helped negotiate agreements that allowed clients to remain in their homes, avoid hefty legal fees, or secure enough time to relocate without facing the trauma of sudden eviction. I also advocated for sealing eviction records, which protected clients from the long-term negative effects of an eviction judgment that could hinder their ability to secure future housing. These outcomes reinforced the importance of legal representation in eviction cases and the real-world consequences of the legal process for individuals and families.

This summer was transformative not only because of the legal skills I developed, but also because of the deep personal connections I formed with my clients and the community. The experience solidified my commitment to doing direct service work for clients. I plan to return to EBCLC housing in the spring with the clinic, and I also hope to spend my years after law school with them as well. The attorneys I worked with were incredibly inspiring, and I want to do what I can to follow in their footsteps.

As I look forward to my career, I carry with me the lessons learned at EBCLC—both in terms of legal acumen and in understanding the broader impact of the work we do as lawyers. The summer gave me a strong foundation in eviction defense, tenant advocacy, and negotiation, all of which will be instrumental as I move forward in my legal journey. Most importantly, it reminded me of the human side of law—the real lives that are affected by the decisions we make in the courtroom and the critical role we play in seeking justice for those in need.

Sincerely,  
Carolyn Chen  
Berkeley Law