



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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ORGANIZATION	Legal Services of Eastern Michigan

Final Reflection:

I would like to use this letter as an opportunity to share the valuable experience I had this summer at Legal Services of Eastern Michigan (LSEM), made possible in part by the funding that was generously provided by Equal Justice America. I spent the summer working as a Law Clerk in LSEM's Housing Unit, where I assisted locals of the Flint community in disputes with their landlords. Through this opportunity, I directly improved many of my clients' housing situations while gaining valuable legal experience, gained a deeper appreciation for poverty's pervasive impact on all facets of life, and will move forward in my legal career with a renewed commitment to use my skills to benefit my community.

Through my fellowship, I frequently dealt with clients in incredibly difficult situations facing apathetic landlords. I assisted one client, Chelsea, who had moved herself and three children into a house under the mistaken belief that she was signing a year-long lease when she had in reality signed a month to month lease. In her 2nd month in the house, Chelsea unfortunately suffered an injury forcing her to take time off of work and to be late on one month's rent. Despite offering to pay the amount in full two weeks later in addition to the next month's rent, the landlord refused the payments and elected to recover the property, giving her 30 days to leave the house she'd just moved her and her kids into. Chelsea believed, but couldn't prove, that this harshness was retribution for making complaints about the condition in which she found the house. Due to her month-to-month lease, Chelsea did have to leave at the landlord's discretion. However, thanks to issues I discovered in the service of Chelsea's Notice to Quit and Complaint, we were able to negotiate Chelsea an additional 45 days before she had to leave. We also ensured that Chelsea would not have to pay the late rent which the landlord refused. While we couldn't keep Chelsea in her home, we bought her crucial time to land on her



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feet and find a new home without an eviction on her record. Before my internship, I would have thought that the additional 45 days was semantic. However, for many of the clients I worked with, those extra few weeks were the difference between finding a home and becoming homeless. Through this experience, I realized how crucial every extra day or dollar we could recover was for our clients. Every additional week we could negotiate or late fee we could waive made a genuine impact on the livelihood of each of our clients.

Through this work, we were also met with the harsh reality that there were clients who we simply couldn't help. Many clients were being evicted simply because they weren't able to pay the rent. These cases were incredibly difficult because, in speaking with the client, I could see that they were genuinely trying their best to sustain themselves. One client, Tanisha, told me how her car broke down which she was unable to fix. She'd relied on the car to get to work, to buy groceries, to get her kids to school. Because of this one issue she fell behind on her rent payment and the landlord wanted her gone. She had applied for government rental assistance but every program had years-long waitlists. To make matters worse, she couldn't find a new place or move her things out because she had no car to do so. While the legal issue was straightforward in her case (she violated her lease and had to leave), the reasons for her violation were the complicated result of how poverty affects every aspect of someone's life.

Going forward, this experience has taught me the invaluable importance of providing and supporting civil legal aid. This experience has shown me how *every* aspect of life is made more difficult through poverty and that navigating the legal system effectively is crucial for someone facing an eviction. I was able to work alongside incredible attorneys whose compassion and commitment to social justice was evident in everything that they did. This experience has made me a life long supporter of civil legal aid and I cannot thank Equal Justice America enough for providing me this experience and insight.