

August 31, 2016

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I am writing to express my gratitude at being awarded an Equal Justice America Summer 2016 fellowship. This summer I clerked at Bread for the City (“Bread”) in Washington, DC. Bread is a non-profit organization providing low-income District of Columbia residents with medical, legal, and social services. The legal department has three practice areas: family law, housing, and public benefits. I estimate that I served over 25 clients at Bread this summer.

Bread has an Attorney of the Day court based project in Landlord-Tenant Court (“L&T”). This project is referred to as a civil Gideon initiative. Its purpose is to randomly select individuals with a case pending before L&T court and guarantee them representation. This project seeks to address the growing concern that tenants facing eviction are rarely represented by counsel while landlords, by contrast, almost always are.

I was drawn to L&T court because it encapsulated the adversity that low-income people face on a daily basis. I interviewed clients, visited their homes to document housing code violations, and researched case law. The clients I served were often left emotionally and mentally frayed at trying to control many moving pieces, such as mental illness, poverty, and the bureaucracy of subsisting on public benefits. The case of Ms. X perfectly illustrates many of the issues I encountered in L&T court. Ms. X was a public housing tenant living exclusively on public benefits amounting to roughly \$700 monthly. She was facing eviction because she owed over \$18,000 in back rent. Ms. X suffered from mental health issues, which left her unable to handle her finances. She entrusted a loved one to pay her rent and bills. That individual abused his responsibilities and failed to pay her rent. I supported the attorney helping Ms. X by taking a holistic approach to interviewing her. I listened to the root of her issues rather than just her legal issue and encouraged her to not get overwhelmed as the attorney walked her through the necessary steps to change her payee and obtain emergency rental assistance funds. Then, the attorney helped Ms. X negotiate a settlement plan with the landlord that allowed her to stay in her home. When writing my closing letter, I outlined steps that Ms. X needed to take to fulfill her settlement negotiations in a way that did not seem “lawyerly” or overly cumbersome.

The walk-in legal clinic was another challenging yet exciting aspect of my experience at Bread. I interviewed clients seeking representation and allowed them to tell me their story and what they wished to accomplish. This is important because poor

people are often left without a voice in their own struggles even by those advocating on their behalf. In this clinic, I provided clients with legal information on family law, public benefit, and housing issues. Assisting a client deduct his child support obligation directly from a monthly settlement payout is a concrete example of how I was able to assist clients in the family law practice area. Another example is drafting a civil protection case plan to assist the attorney in advocating for a client who was seeking refuge from a violent spouse.

In sum, my experience at Bread crystallized my desire to pursue a career in public interest.

Sincerely,

Luz Beato

J.D. Candidate Class of 2017

Managing Editor, *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & Law*, Volume 25

American University Washington College of Law