

August 30, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

First, I want to take this opportunity to thank you and Equal Justice America for supporting of my public interest work this summer. As a law student committed to promoting social justice and serving low-income clients, it makes a huge difference to know that I can find funding for this kind of work. Your organization makes it more likely that students like me will remain committed to making a difference in the lives of people in need. Thank you for all that you do!

This summer, I worked in the Legal Department at Tenants Together, a non-profit that defends and promotes the rights of tenants across the state of California. Through trainings and as I worked on various projects, I learned a great deal about housing law. Armed with this new knowledge, I was able to give advice to tenants facing difficult situations, and provide them with tools to help defend against unfair practices employed by some landlords and banks.

This was often extremely gratifying work, largely because housing issues are so central to people's lives and well-being. When I spoke with clients, I was helping them resolve a problem with their home – the place where they live, eat, sleep, and raise their children. It is so important to have a place where you feel safe and secure, and this summer I was able to help restore much needed stability to people's lives.

For many people in California, the experience of renting an apartment or house is also inextricably linked to their financial security, because of their security deposit. For many low-income people, a security deposit is their single greatest asset. Unfortunately, landlords often take advantage of tenants, and make improper deductions to security deposits once tenants move out, or refuse to return tenants' security deposits altogether.

Tenants Together puts a lot of effort into making sure tenants in California know their rights when it comes to getting their security deposits back, and as an organization has also advocated for laws that would better protect tenants from unscrupulous landlords.

One memorable experience this summer came as I was taking Spanish-language calls on Tenants Together's tenant hotline, which renters across the state can call to get advice on housing issues they are having. I spoke with a woman who lived with her husband and their four children in Waterford, a small city in California's rural Central Valley. Her husband, a farm worker, undoubtedly worked long, hard hours, and still only made just enough for the family to get by. As we started talking, it was immediately clear that the woman was stressed and unsure of what to do. It had been two months since the family had moved, and their previous landlord was refusing to return their \$500 security deposit. The landlord never explained why; meanwhile, the family was forced to come up with money for another deposit for their new place. First, I was able to talk to the caller about her rights under state law, which the landlord had violated.

Then, I helped her take action: I wrote a demand letter in English that she could send to her landlord, translated it back to her, and then explained the process of taking her ex-landlord to small claims court. By the end of the call, the woman's worry had turned into determination. She was ready to defend her rights and get her family's money back.

In addition to helping numerous callers like this on Tenants Together's hotline, I also had the experience of getting out into the field and helping a whole group of people take action to improve their housing situation. In Merced, California, a mid-size city also in the Central Valley, one of the largest buildings in town is the Tioga Apartment complex. For years, the tenants there have put up with broken elevators, cockroaches, water leaks, holes in the walls, and spotty garbage services. The owner of the building has consistently failed to keep up with needed maintenance and repairs.

Finally, in the last year, with the help of Tenants Together's community organizers and local member-volunteers, tenants at the Tioga began to organize, and through protests and contact with the city's building inspectors, began to put pressure on the owner to clean up the building. This summer, I went to Merced as part of a team from Tenants Together's San Francisco office. Standing alongside tenants, we monitored a building inspection, met with the City Attorney's office, staged a protest in front of the apartment complex, and spoke with a journalist covering the story.

At a meeting Tenants Together had arranged with the owner of the building, we made sure tenants were able to voice their demands directly to the owner, and helped negotiate for better maintenance and conditions. Throughout the day, it was clear that having attorneys and law students there advocating on the side of the Tioga's tenants made a huge difference. Suddenly, the landlord and city officials were paying attention to low-income tenants they had previously ignored. Even more importantly, the tenants of the Tioga gained confidence in their own ability to organize and fight for change.

Experiences like these made this summer engaging, educational, and inspirational. I developed new skills, gained knowledge of the law, and was exposed to new ways to create positive changes both in people's lives of and in whole communities. I am excited to continue doing direct legal service work to promote social and economic justice, and to carry what I learned this summer forward to better serve my future clients. It means so much to public-interest-oriented law students like me that an organization like Equal Justice America is out there, and is able to fund such necessary, important work.

Thank you once again for your generous support, and for helping make my summer experience possible.

Sincerely,

Alexx Campbell  
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