

August 24, 2017

TO:

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, Virginia, 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I would like to first thank Equal Justice America for its assistance in allowing me to serve as a legal intern with Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing (LCBH) this last summer. Without your generous assistance, I would not have been able to work for such a prestigious and important legal aid organization in Chicago.

When I came to LCBH, I had some experience working with low-income tenants due to my volunteering with the Metropolitan Tenants Organization (MTO). However, my work with MTO was limited to staffing a hotline and referring callers to other organizations—at LCBH I assisted clients from beginning to end. I so appreciated being able to get to know clients and, in most cases, assist in getting them a desirable outcome.

More than anything, working at LCBH highlighted the plight that rent-burdened individuals face. When more than one-third of one's monthly income is spent on rent, it puts people in a difficult position about how to spend their remaining income. For instance, one client's refrigerator broke days before her son's high school graduation party. The extensive food preparations our client made for out-of-town guests would be spoiled if she did not buy a new refrigerator, but the landlord was unresponsive. Our client bought a new fridge, alerting the landlord she was doing so, and deducted its cost from the next month's rent. Unfortunately, the landlord tried to use this as grounds to evict her. I developed two defenses – the landlord's acquiescence to her using the new fridge to deduct, and an unjust enrichment contract claim – that became the grounds for a favorable settlement.

Other cases were more serious. Many clients had recurring mold issues that were causing negative health effects. One client had a partially-collapsed ceiling in her bathroom. She could not shower and could hardly use the toilet. In such situations, the best outcome was to get them out of the apartment as fast as possible without negative consequences.

Interning at LCBH showed me how having safe and decent housing is a prerequisite for success in all other areas of life. It also highlighted how vulnerable low-income people are to unscrupulous landlords. Additionally, I learned that

housing is only one piece of the puzzle—if someone who is entitled to government benefits doesn't get them, or if someone is having their wages stolen, they are more likely to be evicted.

Working at LCBH taught me an important lesson in working in legal aid: sometimes the client's goals differ from what you think is best. I worked with one client whose landlord harassed her by calling her at all hours of the day and by temporarily shutting off her heat. Our client withheld rent because of these conditions, and the landlord was attempting to evict her. While I believed that the best outcome for our client was to avoid the eviction judgment and move to a new place, she wanted to avoid the eviction but remain. We ultimately got this outcome for her, but I will always remember that ultimately, as legal counselors, we must try to get what the client wants, not what we think is best.

In addition to doing direct service work with clients, I also got experience in developing housing policy. I helped edit LCBH's draft of a Good Cause for Eviction ordinance. This would permit landlords to evict tenants only in situations where there is "good cause," which would help curb displacement from gentrification. Working with LCBH's Policy Director on this and other issues inspired me to write my Law Review article on another innovative housing policy—Community Land Trusts. This attorney will be one of my advisors on the project.

I am so grateful for EJA's assistance, as this internship reaffirmed my desire to work in the field of housing law. I gained tangible skills writing cease and desist letters, motions to dismiss, and complaints. Most of all, however, I gained vital practice interacting with clients who were experiencing crises. On my last day, when I emailed the clients who I was working with saying that I was leaving, I received an email from one of them saying: "I will miss working with you. Your calm and caring demeanor helped me as I was experiencing this mess. I am grateful to you and your organization." This note inspired me more than any class has, and reminded me of why I went to law school in the first place.

Thank you for your assistance, and for everything you do to assist budding public interest lawyers.

Sincerely,
Carl Sessions
J.D. Candidate, Chicago-Kent College of Law
Class of 2019