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Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

My Summer at Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto

It is with great honor that I reflect upon my experiences as a summer fellow at Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto (CLSEPA). This direct legal services nonprofit organization provides much-needed legal counsel and representation to low-income clients in San Mateo County. Most of the clients are Spanish-speaking immigrants who are unfamiliar with the American legal system – and most importantly, with their rights. I have been working in the Housing Program, which has been a busy division of the organization. The tight real estate market in the Silicon Valley and many landlords' desire to turn a profit has been reflected in my clients' cases in regards to evictions, overcharges, and other forms of tenant harassment.

A unique aspect of my organization's location in East Palo Alto is that this city has one of the strongest systems of tenant rights in the Bay Area. In 1988, East Palo Alto instituted a Rent Stabilization Ordinance which included rent control and a just cause ordinance. So I have had a front row seat in seeing local tenants exercise more robust rights in terms of their tenancy and habitability than they could in most other cities. As a budding public interest lawyer, this exposure has been enlightening for how such tenant protections are possible and potentially replicable in other cities. Indeed, from the beginning of my summer fellowship, I have been involved with the housing attorneys in their efforts to advocate for rent control and other tenant protections in Redwood City and others in the region.

One theme that emerged in the seven cases that I managed this summer is a simple lack of compliance by landlords with existing state and local laws. Much of my work has been helping clients to assert their rights as tenants to landlords who are cutting corners in their legal duties. The most common problem is habitability, which arises when landlords do not maintain the property or make necessary repairs. As a result, we have clients who come in and describe substandard living conditions, such as overgrown mold, dysfunctional refrigerators, and pest infestations. Often, clients do not report these habitability issues for fear that their landlords will retaliate by raising their rent or trying to evict them. I had one such client in a neighboring city who had been enduring a host of habitability violations in her apartment, where she had lived with her young children and husband for many years. Every night, raccoons used to sneak in through a hole in the side of the building into their ceiling, cause damage, and disturb their sleep. The bathroom toilet constantly leaked onto the floor, damaging the linoleum. The lock on the front door had worn down to the point that the wood had split and the lock did not secure very well, posing a security risk to the family. Despite my client's multiple verbal complaints, the landlord had not fixed these issues. Then, this summer, she received a notice from the landlord of a \$500 rent increase, which she could not afford. She told a local community organizer, who then

referred her case to our organization. After an intake, I wrote a demand letter to the landlord, stating the landlord's legal duty to maintain the property and make necessary repairs, and then successfully negotiated to raise the rent only by a \$100 until the repairs were done. Even if temporarily, the client and her family were able to pay that negotiated rent and see the repairs being made in their apartment. In that particular city, there is no rent control, so eventually the client and her family will have to relocate to a cheaper apartment. Helping them to stay in the apartment at a reduced rent and in better living conditions for just one extra month may seem like a meager accomplishment. However, I see it not only as easing one desperate family's struggles to make ends meet in the Silicon Valley, but also as a process through which they better understood their rights as tenants – an awareness that will serve them for the rest of their lives and the lives of whomever they educate. In the same vein, I have seen this dual mission played out at CLSEPA: to not only help people in attaining certain tangible needs, but also to purposefully explain the legal system, with all its civic rights and responsibilities, to people who can then become their own advocates.

This summer fellowship has provided me with significant experience with real clients and strengthened my skills in effective intake, case management, negotiation, legal research and writing, and even Spanish. I have also made valuable relationships with other law student interns, public interest lawyers, and the staff. Thanks to the Equal Justice America summer fellowship, I am now much more equipped, motivated, and positioned to pursue a public interest law career!

Jane Cho
Stanford Law School

August 30, 2015

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben:

As a summer fellow, Jane Cho has significantly contributed to the Housing Program of Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto by providing direct legal services, conducting legal research and writing on landlord-tenant and affordable housing issues, and providing administrative support for three housing attorneys. Ms. Cho was an ideal candidate for our summer intern position, because she had already been volunteering in our housing clinic the past academic year through Stanford Law. In her full-time capacity as a summer intern, she has been managing multiple client cases and overseeing them from initial intake through closing. By taking on these responsibilities she has substantially developed her professional skills, such as conducting interviews, drafting demand letters and court documents, and negotiating settlements, as well as in her Spanish language skills. As her cases progressed, she has also gained experience in utilizing the East Palo Alto Rent Stabilization Ordinance to her clients' advantage. She has been helping two clients with enforcing the terms of their Rent Board decisions; with her assistance, one of them will have a compliance hearing with the city, to hold the landlord accountable for repairs that have not been made and rent rebates that should be issued as a result. She has volunteered to come back once school starts and assist the client at the Rent Board hearing.

Ms. Cho also attended the weekly Mandatory Settlement Conferences hosted by our organization at the county courthouse. She has been paired with volunteer attorneys as they interview tenants faced with eviction and negotiate settlements with opposing counsel. She has played a helpful role as a translator for our Spanish-speaking clients and even coached a new attorney in one case. In addition to providing direct legal services, her other major responsibility has been to conduct legal research and writing on housing issues pertinent to our practice. She wrote a memo analyzing the ability of one of our clients to bring a suit against her landlord for retaliatory eviction. She has recently produced a memo analyzing business necessity defenses that defendants can make in disparate impact housing cases. These memos will be useful in the future for our attorneys to assess the viability of claims they want to make.

Thank you for the financial support you provided to Ms. Cho this summer as she provided us with valuable legal assistance. We look forward to continuing our relationship with you!

Regards,

Jason Tarricone
Directing Attorney, Housing & Economic Advancement