

August 29, 2014

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

Re: Equal Justice America, Summer 2014 Fellowship

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Thank you for the fellowship opportunity from Equal Justice America for this summer. The funding allowed me to resume working full-time at Greater Boston Legal Services (“GBLS”) in the Housing Unit. I have worked at GBLS since May 2013, which has only been possible because of Equal Justice America, because I have a 22-month old son and have to pay for his care.

My primary role in the Housing Unit is to assist my supervisor in defending low-income residents against evictions. However, throughout the past year, I have learned a lot in the area of housing law, and have a better understanding that ensuring people have a home takes knowledge, patience and creativity, in and out of the courtroom.

Charlie is an 83-year old man who suffers from numerous conditions, and came to GBLS because he was being evicted from his Assisted Living Facility. This facility has been his home for seven years, but the staff felt it was no longer suited to his needs because of his deteriorating health and dementia. My supervising attorney drafted and argued a motion for a court-appointed guardian ad litem, and was appointed herself, for the purposes of getting Charlie into appropriate housing.

From then on, I was tasked with managing Charlie’s public-housing application. It was already determined that he qualified for a unit at a new home-based medical facility within the local housing authority. The applications were incomplete because Charlie lacked the necessary identification, but since he was declared incompetent, it was up to his caretakers to retrieve the required paperwork.

A seemingly every day errand for most people proved very difficult for us. I made multiple trips and phone calls to many agencies, including the Social Security Administration, the Registry of Motor Vehicles, and the Registry of Vital Statistics. I encountered many roadblocks, and was forced to face the reality that made it so difficult for Charlie and his social workers to obtain what he needed.

Charlie’s situation made me realize how difficult agency policies and guidelines can be for people with even the slightest disadvantage to navigate. Although Charlie had no control over where he lived, who filed his paperwork, or who managed his stuff, he

was nearly homeless because of mistakes made on his behalf. We not only managed to make arrangements to keep Charlie in his home until a more suitable placement can be arranged, but we also got his applications completed so he can move.

Michael is a legally blind veteran, who was facing eviction for mistakenly picking up a package that did not belong to him in his building. Michael did not come to GBLS for legal help until he had already been to court, and signed an Agreement for Judgment, where he agreed to move out in two months. Michael explained that he signed the agreement because he thought he was eligible for Veterans housing, but he did not realize it would take more than two months to apply, be approved, and move in to public housing. Furthermore, he was having difficulty reaching his landlord for a reference, which is necessary to apply for public housing.

I met Michael somewhat accidentally, and only after I volunteered to talk with him because the emergency duty attorney was already meeting with another client. I looked over Michael's paperwork, and I saw that he and the landlord signed a new lease after the court case began, but before Michael signed the agreement. Moreover, I recognized immediately that Michael had cognitive challenges, and feel that a trained mediator should not have allowed him to enter into an agreement.

I drafted a Motion to Vacate the Agreement based on Waiver, and a Request for Reasonable Accommodation. I travelled to Quincy, where I argued the motion. Previously, I discussed with the landlord's attorney that the motion should be vacated because signing a lease created a new tenancy. The attorney assured me that if my motion did not win, the landlord would allow the reasonable accommodation, and allow Michael to stay in his apartment. The judge agreed with the waiver issue, and the landlord's attorney promised they would not bring a new eviction.

Sadly, after 15 months at GBLS, I am leaving to work as an advocate at another non-profit organization. I want to continue to help low-income people improve their quality of life, which is why I have accepted a job that doesn't necessarily require a legal education. However, because of my time at GBLS, and the opportunity provided to me by Equal Justice America, I am better equipped to provide top quality advocacy for low-income residents in Massachusetts.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Keely Newman Elta
Candidate for Juris Doctor, January 2015
Suffolk University Law School