

August 31, 2013

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My Summer Fellowship experience at Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services was unparalleled. Not only was CASLS a cohesive organization that welcomed the legal interns with open arms, but I was able to have a direct impact on the lives of individuals and families living in poverty. The people that I was able to help were all facing eviction from low-income and subsidized housing, and many were encroaching on the possibility of homelessness if they were to lose their spot in the Section 8 program or their current affordable housing.

In order to ensure that my clients could stay in their homes, I played many roles. When clients first came to CASLS after receiving notice that they were facing eviction, I would conduct an initial client intake in order to figure out why the clients were in their current predicament. I would then spend several weeks speaking with property managers, housing authorities, service providers, and medical professionals, and the information I gathered would fit into the story of my clients' lives like pieces of a puzzle. At this point, on behalf of my clients, I would take measures to avoid eviction, such as negotiating with property managers and housing authorities in meetings and conferences or writing letters requesting a reasonable accommodation.

One such client, "Joe," is a 45 year old who suffers from mental illness and learning disabilities. He was raised in poverty and is now an alcoholic who has tried rehab and sees many service providers, but has not been able to stop drinking for any extended period of time. Due to his alcoholism and a lack of confidence, Joe was being taken advantage of by people he barely knew who wanted to hold parties in his apartment. Joe did not initiate these parties, but when his "friends" showed up with alcohol, he could not say no. As a result of the noise these parties generated, his neighbors called the police multiple times. Eventually, management had enough of these disruptions and wanted him out of his low-income apartment building.

However, due to the lack of low-income housing available, it is likely that he would not have been able to find another apartment if he was evicted, and would have ended up couch-surfing and/or in shelters. When Joe came to CASLS, he had received a Notice of Termination of Tenancy and needed to be out of his apartment by a certain date. In response to his seeking our help, we got Joe into Outpatient Addiction Services, encouraged him to attend AA meetings and get a sponsor, and helped him find volunteer opportunities so that he could keep busy and make new friends while giving back to the community. We also spoke with his therapist, who informed us that he was working with Joe on many of these issues, and had already seen great strides with respect to Joe's confidence and ability to say no to people taking advantage of him. After negotiating with Joe's property management and their attorney, we successfully got Joe an Agreement for Judgment that would allow him to stay in his home and would protect him in the event that he faces eviction in the future.

I, along with my supervisor, conducted a client intake with Joe on my very first day at CASLS, so when we closed the case two months later, it was extremely gratifying. Not only did we help Joe stay in his home, but we also facilitated his recovery process so that he gets healthy and avoids facing the threat of losing his home ever again. Joe, along with many of my clients, was born into poverty, and thereby has always been subject to systemic obstacles to success that are largely out of his control, especially in light of his learning disabilities and mental illness. He may have never had someone fighting on his behalf prior to coming to CASLS, so it was an incredible experience being able to do so and seeing the progress he was making concurrently.

As a Summer Fellow, I felt as though I was truly making a difference by fighting to keep my clients in their homes and/or maintain their status as participants in the Section 8 program. Each individual that I worked with had a different story, and I enjoyed speaking with my clients and their service providers to put together the information I gathered into a cohesive narrative of their lives. I hope that in the future no one has to face losing their home and ending up homeless, but for now, CASLS is helping those who cannot avoid eviction on their own. I am so fortunate to have been a Summer Fellow at CASLS and be a part of the struggle against homelessness.

Thank you,

Marissa Mamon
Boston College Law School
Class of 2015