

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I had the privilege of working with Manhattan Legal Services as a Legal Advocate. The organization has several units: a Housing Unit, a Consumer Law Unit, a Disability Benefits Unit, and a Domestic Violence Unit. The Housing Unit that I worked with mostly works on eviction defense cases, as well as assisting individuals in applying for public benefits. The population the organization serves are mainly low-income people or homeless people. The work was an incredibly humbling experience and my experience strengthened my commitment to pursuing a career in the public interest law.

Manhattan Legal Services is unique in that it uses a holistic approach in providing legal services to the homeless. Because of all the units at the organization, including having social workers, the organization is able to provide the best service possible to the client. My job is mainly to assist the housing attorneys in maintaining these marginalized people housed as long as possible. Many of these individuals pay rent and derive their income from Supplemental Security Income (SSI), public benefits accorded by Social Security to individuals who cannot work due to mental or physical disabilities. One part of my role as a legal advocate is to assist the attorneys in determining what source of income the client has, and calculating whether or not the amount of benefits received are accurate. As a result of being on public benefits, many of these clients live in subsidized housing, with poor conditions and surrounded by other tenants who may have known the hardships of living on the street. Without support, many of these tenants become unstable again and for various reasons end up getting evicted. I have learned that strong support services in a subsidized housing unit are paramount to maintaining a disabled individual housed. It is my role to assist the attorneys in ensuring that these people stay housed, not only for the benefit of the client, but for the benefit of the community at large, as less people will be on the street.

My work at Manhattan Legal Services is unique in that I have been able to integrate my social services background into this legal setting. Because of my past experience in housing, I was able to dive into the eviction cases with a background knowledge of typical housing issues that exist in a subsidized market. I was knowledgeable on how subsidized housing worked. Aside from using my legal research and writing skills to type motions to submit on behalf of the client, I am able to offer supportive counseling and listening to someone who is on the brink of losing their home. Through my experience, I have learned how important these social services are when serving a marginalized population. Often times, because of the court calendar and rush of the legal process, I believe lawyers and legal aids can forget the human component of their work and that they are indeed serving a person who is terrified of losing their case. With my social services background, I constantly am reminded to have my client's concern in the back of my mind as I think about how to communicate bad news, as well as feeling joy when there is good news. If a client presents specifically distressed, because of my social services background, I know I should assess their mental health and check-in, as suicide may be a potential issue. Because of my observations of the importance of using social services collaboratively with legal services, I have become more driven to get my Masters in Social Work to serve low-income people more effectively.

At Manhattan Legal Service, the attorneys and social workers are changing lives. The impact and outcome that our work has on clients is indeed life changing. A home offers stability to a client in a way that nothing else can; they have a place to come back to every night, an address where they can maintain correspondence with their doctors and caseworkers, and a place to stay safe. The effect the work has had on me is incredibly gratifying. To be able to say that I assisted in keeping someone housed, off the streets, in a safe sanctuary where they can raise their families and move forward is not only an honor, but incredibly humbling.

Sincerely,

Melissa Gallo

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