

August 30, 2016

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

My summer at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia was very rewarding. I was a legal intern in the Housing Unit. This unit was responsible for assisting low-income clients with landlord-tenant disputes in both private and subsidized housing. I performed intake and client interviews and worked to assist clients with whatever their problem they were facing with their landlord. As a law student in my second summer, I was able to represent clients in settlements in Philadelphia Municipal Court. At the end of the summer, I had conducted intake and assisted over 40 clients.

Nonpayment of rent was the most common issue that brought people into our offices. Many people could not afford rent and so their landlord's took them to court to recoup the money owed. These same people could not afford a lawyer, so if we were not able to represent them in court, they had to face their landlord's attorney on their own, often signing agreements to repay the rent that they could not keep. This was especially true for younger tenants. One client was facing court for the first time after not being able to make rent in her first apartment. I persuaded my supervisor to represent her, not because she had a defense to nonpayment, but because she needed an advocate to be there on her behalf. Ultimately we got her case continued to give her more time to pay her rent and to avoid having a judgment against her. With emotions running high and inexperience of most tenants, merely having a representative present can make all the difference.

Another common client issue I saw were ones with public and subsidized housing. People who are able to move into Section 8 and public housing are in a way lucky. They get to pay reduced rent that is sometimes as low as \$0 a month. However this low cost comes at a high price. Subsidized housing residents are subject to scrutiny over their lives with which people who live in private housing are unfamiliar. One of my clients was living in project-based public housing and she had to submit to periodic home inspections in which her refrigerator was checked for cleanliness. She was also being charged fees every time her children accidentally knocked down the blinds or scraped the walls around the house. Having five kids in all made her that much more vulnerable when her property manager wanted to evict her, claiming she was doing serious damage to the apartment. Our office was able to agree to representation and advise her on ways to gather documentation such as pictures and receipts from damage fees and rent payments. At the intersection of subsidized housing and ignorance of the legal process, CLS's services are especially useful. Subsidized tenants are not only at risk for eviction but they can also lose their voucher or spot in public housing.

With a full case load, I was left with a small amount time for policy work. The underlying policies of the problems that I had the opportunity to explore issues dealing with Civil Gideon and the consequences of the imbalance of power between tenants and their

landlords. I was also able to understand the punitive nature of subsidized housing with often swift retribution when its residents break the rules or have run-ins with law enforcement. Representing low-income clients made me much more aware the experiences of people who live in poverty. I affirmed my interest in lawyering with a social impact. My summer job also showed me the importance of striving to combine large-scale advocacy work with direct client service. Doing this not only helps triage problems low-income clients face every day, but it also looks to resolve the root causes of the issues as well. I plan to dedicate my career to doing just this. Thanks to Equal Justice America for helping me gain this valuable insight.

Sincerely,

Mary Jones
University of Pennsylvania Law School
Class of 2017