

August 25, 2014

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This past summer, I had the pleasure of interning at Legal Aid of North Carolina. I was placed at the Centralized Intake Unit (CIU), where the cases of nearly all clients seeking Legal Aid assistance are first assessed. Cases Legal Aid can potentially represent are transferred to clients' local offices throughout the state. Due to Legal Aid's limited resources, the majority of cases presented cannot be transferred for representation. In these instances, CIU attorneys assist clients as much as possible by providing advice and counsel.

As an intern, I was given job tasks similar to all other CIU attorneys. I was assigned three cases a day and worked under the close supervision of a licensed attorney. In truth, every attorney at the office was readily available to assist and train me, and I feel I benefitted from being able to learn from many different approaches. Even the managing attorney made special efforts to provide me with guidance and direction.

One particularly memorable client was a tenant who received notice that the home her family rented was in foreclosure. She had received letters from the foreclosing bank stating that her family would be evicted once the sale was final. The bank was telling her to vacate. A family member had advised her to stay, but to stop paying rent to her landlord. The client was unsure whether to leave or stay. She was also unsure whether to pay rent, and if so, to whom. Her fear for what would happen to her family had risen to the level of panic.

In this case, I was able to educate the client on a federal law - the Protecting Tenants at Foreclosure Act. This law requires the purchaser of a rented home in a foreclosure sale to honor the lease terms in place, even if the purchaser is a bank.

After assessing the facts of this client's situation, I advised her that her family would most likely be able to stay in their home for the term of their lease. I also advised her that if she kept the terms of her lease, even in the worst-case scenario, she would have to be given 90-day notice to vacate. I cautioned her that this law only applies to "bona fide tenants." Thus in order to take advantage of the law, and also to avoid eviction under North Carolina law, she must continue paying full and timely rent directly to her landlord. When our discussion ended, this client was confident in her legal rights and clear on her legal obligations.

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It was enjoyable to advise this client that the law was on her side, but in my placement at Legal Aid, that was often not the case. Advising clients in cases where they were legally vulnerable was less pleasant, but often even more vital. For example, many clients facing eviction had the false impression that if they appeared at an eviction hearing with the back-rent demanded by their landlords, they would be able to continue in their leases. In most cases, it was essential to advise these clients that their landlords had not only alleged back-rent owed, but also breach of lease, based on the nonpayment of rent. Providing the rent owed would not cure the breach - clients could tender it and still be evicted. For many clients' immediate future, advising on this fact made the difference between homelessness and putting down a deposit on a new residence.

I cannot imagine having spent my summer in a more productive or rewarding way. I have the satisfaction of knowing that the work I did made a difference in many people's lives. What's more, I enjoyed the camaraderie of working with a group of people who were committed to a common cause. I was able to confirm that the nonprofit world is where I feel at home, and where I belong. My summer experience reaffirmed my commitment to public interest work. Thank you for your generous fellowship, which made this possible.

Gratefully,

Caroline Sorensen
Duke Law, 2016