

August 25, 2018

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

This summer I worked at the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau (HLAB), in their Housing division. My experience with HLAB would not have been possible without the generous fellowship from Equal Justice America, and I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to intern with such an incredible organization, so thank you for funding my work.

This summer I undertook a caseload of about eight to ten housing cases, primarily dealing with eviction defense and foreclosure, but I also worked with another summer counsel on a supplemental security income case as well. I did not realize how important working in housing was, particularly in the Boston area, until I got to HLAB. The amount of gentrification in Boston is astounding, and so is the number of evictions. One of my most active cases was a summary process case. My client and her family had complained about the conditions in her home to their landlord, and he had brought a no-fault eviction case against her. The conditions my client was living with were appalling, something I would never even consider living with for a day, and she had been living there for years. Since my client had exercised her constitutional right to a jury trial, her case had not yet been scheduled due to a backlog of jury cases in the housing court. One of my first tasks at HLAB was to argue a motion to reconsider in this client's case; opposing counsel had filed a motion to have my client pay all the rent back that she had (lawfully) withheld. As nerve-racking as this task was to undertake only a few weeks after starting at HLAB, it was also extremely exciting, because I immediately got to put my schooling to use and actually help someone. We ended up winning our motion in opposition, and the court did not require my client to pay the back rent- which would have been an extremely bad outcome for my client and bad precedent for all other tenants. Seeing the joy and relief on my client's face upon winning that motion is something I will never forget.

Aside from handling cases through HLAB, summer housing counsel participated in the Boston Bar Association's "Attorney for the Day" program at the Housing Court. This was one of

the best parts of my summer. Every other Thursday (“Eviction Day” as it is affectionately known), a group of us would set up a table outside the Housing Court and offer pro-bono legal advice to pro se tenants. The first time we did this I was astounded at how many pro se tenants there were at court- practically all of them were unrepresented and practically all of them were unaware that their first court appearance was actually a summary process trial. Even though we helped pro se tenants on a limited appearance basis, this work was also some of the most rewarding. For instance, at my last “Attorney for the Day” I had the opportunity to help a woman stay in her apartment. She was there to defend against a motion to issue execution. I tried to negotiate with the landlord’s attorneys, who were a big firm in Boston, but they just kept brushing me off and said they were not interested in signing another agreement, they just wanted my client out. We had no choice but to go before the judge. With less than thirty minutes to prepare, I prepped my client for direct and cross-examination, as we were about to go into an evidentiary hearing (they were evicting her based on what their property manager allegedly saw in the building, which was a violation of the lease, and they had called the property manager to testify). This woman was adamant that she did not do what the property manager claimed she did, and she couldn’t get evicted because her niece lived with her and she was trying to get full custody of her- an eviction would ruin everything. When we went before the judge I felt a sense of responsibility for this woman and her niece’s future. Ultimately, we didn’t have to examine my client or the property manager- we were able to effectively argue that they did not have a basis for evicting my client, and after a little money was exchanged for rent owed, the Judge agreed that my client was to be allowed to stay in her home. Just like that, a huge weight was lifted.

My experience with HLAB this summer has been the best experience I have had in law school this far. The attorneys I worked under were incredible teachers and amazing legal aid attorneys and the work was the hardest, but the experience was the most rewarding by far. So again, thank you Equal Justice America for allowing me to undertake such a wonderful internship.

Sincerely,

Brittany Burnham
Suffolk University Law School