

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

My Summer at the Legal Aid Society

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I was privileged with the opportunity to work in the Housing Unit at the Legal Aid Society in Queens, New York. The Legal Aid Society serves all five boroughs of the City through civil and criminal defense as well as impact litigation. I was really grateful for the chance to intern at an organization that seeks to eliminate inequalities and effect justice through both micro and macro level advocacy.

Working in the Housing Unit of Legal Aid, I primarily assisted on eviction defense work, representing indigent tenants in housing court against landlords. Eviction defense work is primarily comprised of holdover and nonpayment cases. In a non-payment proceeding, a landlord sues to recover unpaid rent, or arrears as a basis for evicting a tenant. However, in residencies that are not rent-stabilized, landlords can also evict a tenant in holdover proceedings for no reason at all. Throughout the summer, I was given the chance to understand some of the variables that impacted these two types of cases and was able to watch them unfold from start to finish.

I was lucky to have had the chance to do substantive work over the summer, working on motions, advocacy letters and answers. As much of my 1L experience was spent reading and briefing cases, it was exciting to be able to do actual lawyering work. One of the most exciting moments of the summer was writing a motion for an extended stay for a client. The client was a single mother of several children, one of which had cerebral palsy and was wheelchair-bound.

She had been living in an apartment with a subsidy but had withheld rent when her landlord refused to fix a vermin infestation. In an initial stipulation between her and the landlord, she agreed to leave the apartment within several months, which would give her a chance to find another apartment. However, this initial stay was set to expire, and she hadn't been able to find a new apartment.

I was able to write a motion giving her several more months to find a new apartment, based on the individual circumstances of her case. It was extremely rewarding to meet a client, directly advocate for her, and come out with a favorable outcome.

My experience at Legal Aid also gave me the chance to think critically about the issues facing low-income individuals. I worked in Queens which is one of the most diverse areas of the world. This diversity was reflected in our client base, which was comprised of people from many different backgrounds and experiences. However, it also gave me the opportunity to see the discrimination that individuals face because of their race, immigrant status, and socioeconomic class.

For example, many of our clients were paying rent through government subsidies or were living in public housing. It was very disheartening to realize that landlords treat low-income tenants and prospective tenants differently, often failing to complete necessary repairs, or refusing to consider a tenant because he or she will be paying with a subsidy. While the difficult realities facing our clients were saddening to me, I am also glad that I was exposed to them.

My internship gave me a greater understanding of the issues facing low income individuals as well as continued resolve to work towards alleviating it with my future work as a lawyer. Overall, my experience at Legal Aid was rewarding and challenging. I am incredibly grateful for the fellowship I received through Equal Justice America.

The work that I did this summer really confirmed the need for direct legal services and I really appreciate how EJA is making it more accessible for law students to pursue opportunities at legal aid organizations.

Thank you!

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