



Summer 2019 EJA Fellow:



Name: MacKenzie Speer

Law School: Northeastern University School of Law

Fellowship: Legal Aid Chicago

Entry 1:

During the first two weeks with Legal Aid Chicago's Housing Practice Group (HPG), the interns focused on learning the complex landscape of housing assistance. Attorneys in HPG and national organizations offered orientations to the various programs, legal issues, and defenses we might encounter as we work with low-income tenants. While learning the various programs--and maze of acronyms--I supported my supervisor's ongoing casework. My direct supervisor works with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, which means our clients are often facing both the instability of a pending eviction and a threat to their safety. By the same taken, however, these clients also have to access the protections of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). VAWA protects survivors in covered programs from evictions related to their abusers' behavior. For example, if an abusive partner breaks down an apartment door the landlord cannot evict the tenant for the damage to the door. More recently, VAWA has also provided protection for survivors whose loss of freedom included control over economic resources; in one case, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court found that if an abusive partner controls a tenant's bank account such that she is unable to pay rent, the relevant housing authority may not evict the tenant for nonpayment.

Entry 2:

After learning more about the many issues facing low-income voucher holders and project-based and public housing residents, and different protections afforded each group, I started conducting intakes with potential clients. Many of our clients come to us days before an eviction court date; evictions move more quickly through court than most civil cases. In addition to evaluating the merits of a client's case, we have to assess the level of emergency--losing housing is always an emergency for the family facing eviction, but the client's legal rights change depending on the notice period and if and when they've already been to court. On Wednesdays we present cases to the full HPG and the group votes on whether or not to accept the case for representation,



gather more information, or offer advice and close the case. If an important deadline comes before our Wednesday meeting, we present cases to a supervising attorney as soon as possible. During my first intake I had three emergencies out of four clients. As our intake appointments fill up and are scheduled further out--there is always more need than capacity in our group--more cases become emergencies by the time we conduct a full intake. In addition to the stress this causes our clients, it impacts our ability to develop a relationship with our them and advise them on their rights and responsibilities before a court date. Attorneys for landlords and property managers often take advantage of a tenant's fear and lack of legal education in this critical period before they find free or lost-cost representation.

Entry 3:

Last week I represented a client in an informal hearing to challenge the termination of her Housing Choice Voucher. The client, Ms. Jones, was at work on MLK Day when she received a phone call that the family friend watching her kids had been arrested in her apartment for possessing firearms and illegal narcotics. Ms. Jones rushed home to get her kids and learned from the police that the friend had likely been dealing out her apartment since he started watching her kids a few weeks prior. Ms. Jones was working two jobs at the time -- one during the day and one overnight -- and she had only a few hours at home with her kids when she worked double shifts. On double-shift days she would get home around 4 p.m., cook her kids' dinner, and leave around 8:30 p.m. for her second job. She previously relied on her mother to watch her kids--until her daughter disclosed that her mother's boyfriend sexually touched her minor daughter. So when her family friend offered to come over at 8:30 p.m. to make sure the kids ate and got into bed, Ms. Jones felt relieved to have someone she knew looking after them. A few weeks later, she got the call from the police. At the time, her landlord knew she wasn't involved in the drug-related activity and let her stay in the apartment and Ms. Jones' immediate concern was finding new child care. A few months after the arrest at her apartment, the landlord sold the building. A few more months later, Ms. Jones and this new landlord got into a dispute about a \$50 check from the energy company that had picked up an old fridge at Ms. Jones' unit. The landlord also wanted more money for the unit, so he sent Ms. Jones a notice terminating her tenancy and cited the arrest warrant executed at the unit 9 months earlier. The Chicago Housing Authority received a copy of this notice and started the process of terminating Ms. Jones' voucher, which covers the remaining portion of market rent after Ms. Jones pays 30% of her income in rent. As a single parent working full time, Ms. Jones cannot afford market rent and supporting four children--one of whom she adopted after her cousin died a few years ago. Ms. Jones is exactly the type of tenant whose family benefits from the stability of this housing assistance. In her new apartment, she has built a stronger community than she had before moving to Chicago--including another mother who she now trades child care responsibilities with because they work opposite shifts. Terminating Ms. Jones' voucher would undermine her housing, work, and custody of her adopted daughter.



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