

September 19, 2019

Equal Justice America
Building II, Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

To Whom It May Concern:

I have had the privilege of working this summer at Legal Service of Eastern Missouri (LSEM) as part of the Neighborhood Vacancy Initiative. LSEM's Neighborhoods Vacancy Initiative (NVI) uses legal services to combat abandonment and its deleterious effects in struggling St. Louis neighborhoods. NVI uses Missouri state laws on receivership, statutory nuisance, and housing abandonment to sue absentee owners of vacant properties that are in violation of local codes and ordinances. If those owners do not take responsibility for the nuisance conditions at their properties, clients can rehabilitate the property themselves and, with the judge's approval, take ownership of the property. Through this litigation, clients can transform eyesores into assets for the community. NVI also helps to prevent vacancy on the front end by preparing beneficiary deeds for low-income clients, ensuring their homes do not become tangled in complex probate proceedings, which often leads to abandonment.

Working with NVI was extremely rewarding because it allowed me to collaborate with partners all over St. Louis. NVI is deeply collaborative – working with private and public actors to find long-term solutions to vacancy. I was able to spend one day working in-house with a Community Development Corporation (CDC) in my own neighborhood. Missouri's receivership, nuisance, and abandonment statutes give standing only to neighborhood associations and CDCs that are organized, in part, to address housing issues in a particular neighborhood. Thus, most of NVI's clients are nonprofit community organizations that have been doing the on-the-ground work of upkeeping their small corners of the city for decades: working to maintain safe streets, good schools, quality housing options, and a healthy environment for their residents. Because they are embedded in the community, these organizations have wealth of local knowledge and are trusted by local residents. Their background is invaluable. They are leaders in the work of grassroots-led community building citywide, and they help make NVI a better and more accountable project. Before NVI, these organizations, though rich in collective power, lacked the legal tools necessary to combat the intractable problem of privately-owned vacant property in their neighborhoods. With NVI, these organizations have been empowered to expand the scope of their good work.

I was born and raised in St. Louis, and it has long been my goal to return there to work in public interest. I hope to go back to NVI after graduation and continue looking for creative grassroots ways to use the law as a community building tool. I am grateful to EJA for providing the financial support that made my summer with NVI possible.

Sincerely,

Rachel Waterman