

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America

Dear Dan,

My first legal job at EBCLC was not easy. Learning the basics of local landlord-tenant law, of which I had no previous exposure to, and being asked to counsel individuals on legal issues was stressful. The pressure mounted when I did my first client interview and I realized tenants coming into our clinic were likely also going through one of the most stressful periods of their lives. Individuals who accomplished the difficult task of seeking legal help were there because the threat of losing their housing situation had become an imminent possibility. Behind this stress were abuses, contention, neglect, and hostility that had been building up leading to the notices and legal threats. These individuals felt the additional pressures of finding affordable housing in the Bay Area on short notice and beginning the task of learning the rights and protections that support them as tenants must have been daunting.

Tenants were often looking for someone to help take on some of their burden so the remainder could be manageable. While attempting to provide that service, I came to see that the stress on these individuals was often far from a simple a failure to pay rent and the threat of eviction. The intersectionality of the issues encompassed within the group of tenants who required our services was broad and I encountered difficult stories that made our assistance of tenants this summer fulfilling, but also, very quickly, emotionally draining. We strove to provide counseling beyond simply relating the legal knowledge our clients would need. And I came to see that without such consideration, these individuals could remain in a cycle of oppression that would keep them vulnerable to future abuse.

For a large portion of tenants coming in to resolve ongoing housing issues, it is not their first time going through the ordeal. Sometimes there are reoccurring issues with other individuals in the living space, like contentious relationships with landlords, neighbors, and roommates, that seem to haunt their tenancies, leading to them being uprooted from several homes. One woman came into our Wednesday night clinic with such an issue with her current landlord. After evaluating her situation, I was given the unfortunate task to inform her that her problems had no legal remedies at that point in time and, as a result, we would be unable to take her on as a client. She was upset, to a point where as we continued with our time together, she would be sidetracked from our conversation to vent on my and the clinic's inability to help her in ways she expected. I struggled with my feelings of insecurity and inadequacy her anger brought on me. But I could tell the strong injustice she felt came from feeling attacked in ways that were hostile and discriminatory towards her mental disabilities, which exacerbated miscommunications, and fostered animosity between her and others in her life. With the support of my supervisor and other interns and attorneys, I worked on trying to refocus my time with her towards solutions we could work on together while she was in the office without making her feel silenced for venting her own frustrations. By the time our night was over, I felt drained. But before she left, she asked to give me a hug. Then she surprised me with an apology for her angry words and targeted

hostility. Her goodbye reinforced my belief in the importance of a holistic review of a case to identify issues beyond the area of law one is working in. It also reminded me of the importance of compassionate counseling when one works with vulnerable populations, who come in with a host of unidentified issues that could be the source or a part of the reason why they required legal counsel in the first place.

So, while my work at EBCLC was not easy for me, it was important in helping me realize the strength of a legal advocate as a trusted confidante and, often, a counselor. It expanded my view of what an attorney's role can be, and maybe what it should be as well.

Sincerely,

Patricia Lin