

Jason A.S. Drake

November 3, 2019

Mr. Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II, Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I was immensely pleased to work with the Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia this summer. During my time there, I was humbled to participate in the important community-oriented work that Legal Aid performs. Their mission to promote the equal application of justice for indigent and otherwise vulnerable families of eastern Virginia is one that has deeply informed my outlook on the legal profession and its possibilities for promoting social good. The lawyers of Legal Aid strive to both meet the individual legal needs of their clients and to challenge systemic injustice and the root causes of poverty and inequality. I drew great satisfaction from assisting the attorneys at Legal Aid toward these ends. More than just providing moral gratification, working with Legal Aid also helped me develop important practical legal skills.

My primary duty this summer was to assist with an ongoing case Legal Aid is assembling concerning the redevelopment of Norfolk's St. Paul's area. Here, the City of Norfolk is planning to demolish some 1,700 units of public housing currently supporting over 4,200 of Norfolk's most vulnerable citizens. On top of the rubble, the city proposes to build a mixed-income development, one encompassing significantly fewer affordable housing opportunities for former residents seeking to remain in their original community or even Norfolk more broadly.

The result amounts to little more than an attempt to jump-start gentrification of the area with little thought or care for where those displaced by the demolition will end up.

In opposition to this tragedy in the making, I worked with Sarah Black, Legal Aid's Deputy Director and Director of Litigation, to draft a complaint against the City of Norfolk, the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, and the Federal department of Housing and Urban Development. Being the basis for complex litigation, this was a multifarious task that involved elements of legal research, social mapping, community outreach, crafting FOIA requests, drafting complaint language, and more. In particular, I learned a great deal about identifying causes of action that current residents might take against the City while uncovering and translating caselaw relevant to their particular circumstances. I was also able to translate my background as a former graduate student in History to research and distill the history of Norfolk's redevelopment efforts as part of forming the scaffolding for Legal Aid's complaint, thus putting old skills to new use.

When considered together, my experiences at LASEVA this summer have given me an invaluable perspective on the range of possibilities that legal practice can have in affecting positive change in people's lives. It is for this reason that I have returned to Legal Aid during my 2L Fall semester through an externship, so that I can continue to provide whatever assistance I can in this important work. I am grateful to Equal Justice America for providing the opportunity to do so.

With sincerity,

Jason A.S. Drake