

August 12, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer, I had the wonderful opportunity of working in the housing department of the Neighborhood Legal Services Program in Washington, D.C. During this internship I was able to assist staff attorneys in advocating for tenants facing unlawful living conditions, source of income discrimination, and eviction.

One client I worked with had filed a complaint with the Office of Human Rights because she faced source of income discrimination when searching for an apartment with her housing voucher. The client was initially led to believe that she would be able to rent a unit within a luxury apartment building in D.C. but was denied the opportunity to lease up because of her credit score. After she filed her complaint, the landlord of the apartment building she applied to responded and said that they have the right to screen applicants based on their credit score so they can protect themselves against financial risk. This rebuttal was not convincing to the client or to our team however, because the client's voucher covered her entire rent. As it is unlikely that the DC Housing Authority will fall behind on their rent payments, the landlord did not have a valid financial argument for why they rejected the client's rental application. I was asked to work with the client to draft an affidavit detailing the in person and over-the-phone conversations that she had had with the management of the property. She believed that it was not fair for her application to be denied based on her credit score and felt that the property managers did not want her to live in the apartment building because she did not fit their target demographic of tenants.

I was proud to be able to help her to stand up for herself and hold this landlord accountable for their discriminatory behavior so she could get the apartment she deserves. I was also humbled to be part of a team that she trusted to support her as I could tell how much it meant to her to have someone validate her experience and agree that the landlord's reason for denying her application was not adequate given her circumstances. While debriefing about this case with my supervising attorney, she shared with me how common source of income discrimination is in D.C. as many landlords want to keep certain people out of their apartment buildings to make their properties seem more attractive, and many prospective renters do not know that it is illegal to be denied a rental unit solely because you are a voucher holder. Learning more about these cases and getting to know this client's story reminded me of the importance of public interest lawyers who fight for the enforcement of policies created to benefit disadvantaged individuals and helped to confirm in me my desire to pursue this career.

I also worked on several housing conditions cases. On one case, I was a part of the initial client call to gather details about what the client was facing in her home. This client was living in an apartment with her school-aged son that had water damage which resulted in mold, a perpetually overflowing toilet, caterpillars in the bathtub, and rats in the entryway. She had

contacted the property manager several times to notify him of the issues and he and his team continuously failed to remedy them. This client had spent her own money in attempts to mitigate the damage in her apartment and her son developed respiratory issues because of the mold in the apartment. She came to NLSP because she wanted to be able to break her 12-month lease, settle her debts, and leave the apartment she was in. It was difficult and maddening to hear about this woman's living conditions and her property manager's lack of care and response toward her complaints. I first drafted a letter to this client's property manager offering to forego a conditions case in exchange for him allowing the client to quit the lease without the contractual consequences. After the property manager did not respond to this offer, I drafted a conditions complaint. It was impactful for me to listen to this client's story firsthand and to understand the powerlessness that can result from feeling like you have no way to obligate your landlord to fulfill his part of the contract and maintain lawful, healthy living conditions. I was touched to be able to be a part of this client's demand for justice for herself and her son. These cases helped me to fully realize the importance of subsidized legal services that allow equal access to legal action that empowers individuals to hold others accountable for denying them the rights they are entitled to.

This internship was an amazing learning experience and was truly impactful. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Olivia Haskell  
American University Washington College of Law