

August 15, 2021

Dan Ruben
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building 2, Suite 204
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Thanks in part to the fellowship funding that Equal Justice America has provided, I was able to spend this past summer working as a legal intern at the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC) in Berkeley, California. It was the best summer experience I could have asked for. I feel so fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to work with the wonderful people at EBCLC, and I am very grateful for EJA's support.

Over the course of the summer, I was able to participate in meaningful legal work in two primary contexts: First, I followed several cases, each through a different part of its "life cycle." Through this work, I gained invaluable experience in legal writing and research, among other things. This was incredibly eye-opening for me, giving me a glimpse into the work of a litigator at a legal aid non-profit, and absolutely inspired me to want to pursue a career in litigation.

The second context is the one I will focus on in this letter—every Wednesday, I participated in EBCLC's Tenants Rights Workshop (TRW). This typically functions as a walk-in clinic, but due to the pandemic, all services were conducted by phone. Tenants called in with issues relating to their housing, and, with the assistance of a rotating slate of supervising attorneys, I was tasked with researching the legal dimensions of tenants' housing issues and brainstorming creative solutions to offer to our clients. This often culminated in my drafting a demand letter to a client's landlord, addressing issues ranging from habitability to reasonable accommodations for disabilities to landlord harassment and eviction threats.

Prior to my work at EBCLC, I had worked directly with homeless communities (of which, in Berkeley, there are many). For me, having seen firsthand the suffering that comes from losing a home made my TRW work feel incredibly consequential. I do not myself know what it is like to be unhoused, but I have spoken with many unhoused people about their experiences living outside, and I firmly believe that keeping people housed is one of the most imperative goals that a legal aid organization can pursue. Decent housing is a human right, and especially in a country as rich as ours, homelessness is utterly shameful.

Deep injustices arise from power imbalances between landlords and renters and do so with alarming potency when renters are poor, BIPOC, and/or persons with disabilities (as all of our TRW clients are). My very first TRW call stands out in my mind as exemplifying this truism. The first is about a man who I will call Mr. R. Mr. R, a recent immigrant and a monolingual Spanish speaker, called in and told us that his old landlord had sold his small apartment complex to a new owner. The new owner called a meeting with all of the tenants in the building and told them that because the building was not up to code, he had just cause to evict them. This, by the way, is not true. But, the new

owner said, because he was a nice guy, he would be willing to pay them \$1,000 if they left voluntarily.

My understanding, for context, is that when a decent and honest owner in the San Francisco Bay Area seeks to buy a tenant out of his unit, he will typically offer *at least* \$15,000. But those who accepted the \$1,000 did not, understandably, realize that the threat of eviction was hollow—a ploy. They made a decision that, given their limited information, seemed rational.

After consulting with my supervising attorney, I called Mr. R back. I explained that his landlord was a lying scumbag (though I phrased it more politely) and that, while he did not need to move if he did not wish to, he should ask his landlord for far more money if he did have an interest in moving. Because Mr. R did not speak English, I drafted a letter to that effect for him to send to his landlord. Mr. R was deeply grateful, and as we finished our call, he said, “Thank you. You saved me.”

This was, as I mentioned, my first TRW call. It was an emotional day for me. I was incredibly angry to hear that Mr. R’s scumbag landlord had succeeded in tricking a number of his tenants into leaving with his insulting \$1,000 offer—which would not even cover the security deposit at a new apartment. I was deeply concerned and saddened for these unknown strangers, and I wondered what happened to them after they packed their bags.

On that day, I was angry, but I also felt so grateful that I was able to make a difference for Mr. R. My call with Mr. R emphasized for me the incredible importance of using the privilege of my legal education to support those who need it most. Laws designed to protect citizens can only serve that purpose when citizens know their rights—and all too often, it is impossible to know one’s rights without access to individuals trained to parse statutory language.

Serving as a bridge from people like Mr. R to their legal rights is one of the most important things I did this past summer, and for me, it was deeply meaningful. After this summer experience, I feel more excited than ever to go on to use my legal knowledge to support communities that need it most. I know that in the end, achieving housing justice in this country will require a systemic overhaul, and my contribution will be a drop in the bucket. But to me, adding that drop is the most worthwhile use of my time on this planet.

Best wishes,

Julia Irwin
Stanford Law School