

Adriana Luciano
30 W. 60th St., Apt. 2R
New York, NY 10023

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

September 7, 2007

Dear Mr. Ruben:

My name is Adriana Luciano. I am a student at Columbia Law School. Last summer, I received funding from Equal Justice America sponsoring my internship placement at Brooklyn Legal Services Corp. A. I am writing to express my gratitude for your support and to share some highlights from my summer experience.

The office I worked in focused on community issues in Williamsburg, particularly those related to gentrification and displacement of low-income residents. Marty Needelman, Brooklyn "A"'s director, is personally committed to fighting displacement and ensuring that new construction maintains a certain percentage of affordable housing. Interns in the community development group attended morning protest rallies about once a week and issued press releases against "the most abusive landlord in New York City." Other groups were less policy-oriented and offered more direct client contact. These included the senior housing group, comprehensive rights (HIV) group, family law group, and administrative law. I was paired with an attorney who dealt with housing issues for senior citizens below the poverty line. Almost all of these seniors are rent-regulated, so my attorney's work tied in very closely to the office's overall mission.

As an intern, I had a crash course in rent-regulation law in New York City. My supervising attorney and I really clicked, and she was willing to give me as much work as I was willing to take on. Over the summer I did a significant amount of legal research and writing. I drafted most of my attorney's motions and response papers and I often accompanied her to both housing and family court. I also performed client intake and helped resolve simpler administrative issues with the DHCR.

My work with the housing cases was especially rewarding. There is currently no right of representation in civil cases in New York City, although all the landlords have full-time lawyers. This results in many low-income and elderly tenants appearing pro se and signing settlement stipulations that may not be *unconscionable*, but that are certainly unfair. Looking back at the summer, I am proudest of getting several of these agreements overturned. One such client was a 76-year-old rent-stabilized man living on social security. He had a gambling problem and had failed to pay rent for seven months. The landlord sued for nonpayment. This client originally represented himself. He signed a settlement in which the landlord agreed to waive the back rent in exchange for the client moving out in 30 days; however, the client had not moved in 27 years and was unaware that he would not be able to find another apartment for \$500 per month. He was facing homelessness. My attorney successfully argued that the client was unaware of several important defenses when he appeared pro se, creating automatic grounds for vacating the settlement. First, the landlord did not list the client's rent-stabilized status in the petition—a fatal jurisdictional flaw. Second, the client did not know he was eligible for back-rent assistance from several community organizations and a Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption that would freeze his rent at its current rate. And finally, he was unaware he had agreed

to be homeless! The judge agreed to vacate the stipulation. Since I had researched and drafted our motion papers, I felt like I had directly helped this man keep his apartment.

I was quite surprised to learn how disaffected the city administrative agencies are concerning housing issues. Often all it took to secure repairs for clients in city housing was an angry letter from counsel. We represented one client who casually mentioned during a meeting that her project apartment had a leaky hole in the bathroom ceiling and that for the past year she had to use an umbrella when she used the bathroom. She called the manager every 2 weeks to get it fixed, and a repairman always came, but he never fixed it. She had tried calling the complaint line, but was brushed off. I called the complaint line, the manager, and the head of the Brooklyn Housing Authority – twice – and never spoke to anyone helpful. So I sent a letter to the same individuals explaining that the client had retained a lawyer and we were planning to sue for breach of implied warranty of habitability. I never got a response, but the client called two weeks later and said they replaced the leaky pipes and patched up her ceiling.

Hopefully I have expressed to you what a wonderful time I had last summer. It meant a lot to me to receive support for a public interest placement. In college, I was never financially able to take public interest jobs because my financial aid packages always included a summer earnings component. I am grateful to EJA for allowing me to have the kind of summer I've always wanted, but that was always out of reach. Thanks to my experience last summer, I am looking forward to entering a career in public interest law after graduation.

With thanks,

Adriana Luciano
Columbia Law School, class of 2009