

Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America

July 29, 2017

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I'm writing today to thank you, and everyone at Equal Justice America, for your support of students pursuing work at legal service organizations. With the support of an Equal Justice America Fellowship, I recently completed a summer internship in the Asian Outreach Unit (AOU) at Greater Boston Legal Services. While I entered law school thinking that I wanted to pursue a career in legal services, before this summer I didn't have any firsthand experience with the work. After spending ten weeks in the Asian Outreach Unit, I'm more convinced than ever that legal services is where I belong.

Over the summer, I saw up close the injustice meted out to the most marginalized members of American society. My clients, who were primarily Chinese immigrants, suffered because of their vulnerability: because they were fluent in neither English nor the labyrinthine American legal system, because they lacked immigration status, because they were born into poverty. For these reasons – and because our system permits as much – my clients suffered. Landlords evicted them from their homes in order to build luxury condominiums. Bosses withheld overtime pay and refused to abide by minimum wage laws. Spouses took paychecks and freedom and bodies without permission, confident that their own education and money and skin color would insulate them from the consequences of their abuse.

As an organization dedicated to working with Asian immigrant populations, AOU often provided the bridge between these clients and justice. We listened to their stories, conducted legal research, untangled (as best anyone can) the web of government bureaucracy, and pushed back against entrenched systems of power. But during my time at AOU, I often felt our direct service work akin to bailing out a sinking ship with a child's plastic beach pail. A client who

came to us facing a no-fault eviction could get, say, six more months in her home. That's a *hell* of a lot better than nothing. But for a place where she's spent 35 years, where she raised her children, where she cared for her elderly [family member] as cancer slowly took her from this world, six months doesn't seem enough. Time and again, our clients came face to face with a system not designed by or for them.

For these reasons, the community lawyering aspect of AOU feels all the more critical. In addition to direct services work, AOU conducted Know Your Rights trainings for high school students who'd recently immigrated from China, laid the groundwork for an UndocuAsian project with a local organizer, and helped facilitate negotiations between a burgeoning tenant association and their landlord. This work, in which our legal knowledge played a supporting role to community empowerment, feels especially critical now, when the federal government is slashing the budget for legal services and political rhetoric seeks to vilify the already oppressed. Now more than ever it's essential not only to represent individuals but also to help build the scaffolding so that marginalized communities can demand – and receive – true justice.

My time at AOU was better than I could have imagined. I learned so much about the law, about being an advocate, and about the communities we serve. I learned from compassionate, dedicated, and extremely talented lawyers and paralegals. I feel so utterly grateful for the opportunity to have spent my summer doing this work. Thank you for helping to support what we do, for making my experience possible, and for joining in the struggle.

Sincerely,

Alexander Milvae
Harvard Law School
Class of 2019