

## **Dakota Rakestraw**

Over the summer, I interned at King County Bar Association's Housing Justice Project (HJP) in Seattle. In April of 2021, Washington passed a right to counsel statute for low-income tenants facing eviction, and HJP provides eviction defense for low-income tenants in King County. For my internship, I had three big goals: seeing how a courtroom operates, improving my client-facing skills, and drafting legal documents.

As this was my first practical legal experience, seeing how the courtroom operates felt fundamental. Listening to ex-parte court every day, I was exposed to how arguments are constructed for a hearing or what legal strategy is being pursued. There are so many things to consider like the culture of ex-parte hearings, the opposing counsel's personal style in representing their clients, the client's goals, the social advocacy of trying to keep people housed, and the commissioner or judge who will hear the issues. By talking with the attorneys and watching court, I have seen many different perspectives and have begun developing my own legal muscles.

Another big goal of mine was improving my client-facing skills. I have worked with people in hardship before; however, taking client declarations and regularly hearing client stories about how they could lose their homes broke me down. At one point during a declaration, my brain froze because I knew that the answers to my questions were going to detail some systemic injustice inflicted upon the client. But in those moments, I have learned to pull through and be resilient. Breaking down does not help the client meet their goals.

The last big goal was learning to draft legal documents. Learning to draft a complaint was incredibly enriching. I learned how to interview a client for fact gathering, and I learned how to decide which facts should go into a complaint to support the legal arguments being addressed. I also learned how to draft declarations. Under Washington's landlord-tenant law, a commissioner may re-instate a tenancy for equitable reasons, and the law lists out factors for the commissioners to consider. In drafting the declarations, I learned how to craft questions that would help get facts out to speak to those factors. Learning to draft these types of legal documents helped give me a better sense of how law is practiced outside of law school.

Goals aside, and most importantly, interning at the Housing Justice Project with like-minded attorneys and staff showed me that people who see the hidden violence of evictions are working their hardest to prevent evictions in the first place. Prior to right to counsel, an average eviction proceeding looked like this: A tenant does not show up for their show cause hearing, and, if the landlord proves all the basic elements for an unlawful detainer action, the commissioner will grant the writ of restitution. The tenant could then be evicted by the following week. A landmark study out of University of California San Francisco in July 2023, reported that evictions almost inevitably lead to houselessness and what the study authors call a "personal doom spiral" of increasingly insurmountable barriers to becoming re-housed.

Since 2021, the world of residential evictions in Washington looks radically different. Because tenants now have a right to an attorney and notices must inform them of that right, tenants can stay housed for much longer periods of time and escape the violence of evictions with the help of HJP attorneys and staff.

But who are these tenants they are keeping housed? From my experience, these tenants are women of color with children who cannot pay full rent because they must miss work regularly to take care of their children. This is who landlords are evicting. Every day, the U.S. prioritizes property and landlords' incomes over someone's need for shelter. Yet, the attorneys I worked with refuse to accept this unjust world. They challenge the system, and when the system challenges them back, they adapt, pushing new legal arguments always rooted in the belief that no one should be without a roof over their head and a stable place to call home. These attorneys inspire me through their relentless pursuit for housing equality and tenacity to challenge a system that is the root cause of homelessness.