

Renee Korgood  
Final Reflection  
RCCLIF

This semester, I had the pleasure and privilege of working with WATCH CDC to implement expanded programming for eviction prevention and outreach. After a year of volunteering with WATCH, I wanted to use the skills I had gained to address needs I saw in the community. In particular, I saw that we could provide more complete services for our clients facing eviction. When a client knows that they will have help with their paperwork and an ally at their side in housing court, they are able to advocate for themselves more effectively and remain longer in their homes. With this project, I wanted to provide tenants with a service that would improve their housing court outcomes and engage the Waltham and Brandeis communities in local housing activism.

WATCH CDC, as my community partner, hosted the trainings and helped me develop the program and our outreach plan, and I mainly worked with Suzi Solomon, the Housing Clinic Coordinator. I also partnered with Alan Minuskin, the Director of the Boston College Legal Lab Housing Clinic, who ran both of our trainings and connect me with key personnel at the Waltham District Court and the Northeast Housing Court. To implement this project, I wanted to hold two trainings for volunteers to become housing clinic allies (those who would accompany tenants to court) and then begin pairing them with tenants who were facing eviction. For this, I held one training on February 6<sup>th</sup>, outlining the contours of housing law and what the role of a housing court ally can be. At this training, we had 24 attendees. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, we held our second training, which reviewed the previous training and provided emotional support skills for supporting a tenant during housing court as well as maintaining personal mental health during the process. This training had 12 attendees. I also coordinated a court observation session with Joseph Galvin, the Waltham Court Clerk Magistrate, who answered our questions after we watched a session of housing court. This session had 9 volunteer attendees. In addition to the ally program, I used the Massachusetts Trial Court website to identify tenants in Waltham with an eviction hearing scheduled and mail them an offer of our free housing services. I also planned to send out flyers to every student in Waltham through the Waltham Public School system, however those were scheduled to be sent out around the time that schools began closing.

I measured the impact of what we were able to accomplish with the program based on my expected recruitment goals, our actual recruitment, and their evaluations of their experiences. Unfortunately, the impact of our program on tenants in Waltham is null, because we did not connect any volunteers with tenants facing eviction before COVID-19 led to the closing of the courts, schools, and WATCH's offices. To evaluate the experiences of my volunteers, I used a survey that asked them to rate their knowledge and experience in different skills related to volunteers from before the trainings and after the trainings. I also solicited feedback about the trainings in case they are able to continue into the future. All of the volunteers who filled out the survey expressed a higher level of confidence and knowledge about housing law and serving as an ally. Suggestions for improving the trainings included making our recordings more available for those who missed the trainings and having a list of resources to provide for tenants that lose their case. Both of these improvements were planned to be implemented through March and April as we continued with the program.

One certain unexpected success was the number of volunteers that I successfully recruited to the training, which did place strains on the resources I had budgeted for before the semester. I had planned for a volunteer group of about 8-10, split half and half between Brandeis students and the Waltham community. I budgeted for that amount of food, that informed which space we could use at WATCH's office, and I had thought that would be our capacity for pairing volunteers with tenants in need. In addition, we had decided that we needed to cover too much material for one training and instead hold two. When we recruited over 25 people who RSVP'd to the training, I was ecstatic to see the interest but needed to change how I planned on allocating my resources. Thankfully, both trainings went off without a hitch due to space being offered to us by BARCC in a neighboring office and some flexibility in my budget. Another obstacle I faced was scheduling and building relationships with the courts so our program could function. We wanted to have the approval of the clerks magistrate at the Waltham and Woburn courthouses so our volunteers would be free to assist their clients without harassment from attorneys or landlords. While we were able to establish a relationship with the Waltham District Court, the justice at the Northeast Housing Court announced her retirement shortly before we were due to start volunteering there. Thus, we were unable to build out a program to respond to evictions taken to court in Woburn.

The program is currently paused, both because we cannot hold trainings or meet clients in person and because there is a moratorium on evictions in Massachusetts due to COVID-19, negating the need for this service. I am hoping to work with another Brandeis student next semester or with Suzi Solomon, my supervisor, to ensure that our already trained volunteers have the opportunity to work with clients. I also hope to establish the training as a semesterly or yearly event. Suzi has also been doing outreach to tenants and students, and that will continue next year.

This semester was an incredible experience, and I learned so much about Waltham, housing and service through the Rich Collins fellowship. I know that there is so much work to be done, and that my work is most valuable if I'm improving the lives of those in Waltham who face the worst circumstances. I've learned where I thrive as part of a service-oriented organization, which is when I am mobilizing volunteers and working to innovate new programs. I think that I still have a lot to learn in terms of developing strategies for tenant empowerment. Moving forward, I plan on doing advocacy that is led by tenants and works to provide them with the tools to self-advocate. In addition, the other Rich Collins fellows taught me a lot about the value of other types of service projects. I never really identified with "community service," and found it to be distinct from the "activism" that I took part in. Through this fellowship, I was able to connect the two to build an impactful program in my community.