

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

99 Chauncy Street, Suite 500, Boston, MA 02111-1703

PHONE 617-357-0700 ■ FAX 617-357-0777 ■ www.mlri.org

Proposal for pro bono assistance on systemic work for low income tenants April 2009

We are pleased to submit this proposal from Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) for a pro bono attorney to work in our Housing Unit.

MLRI is a non-profit legal services organization committed to promoting social and economic justice across Massachusetts through advocacy, education and legal action. Our mission is to ensure the fundamental needs of traditionally underserved, low-income populations are met; to defend against policies and practices that harm people living in poverty; to advocate for systemic reforms; and to provide support to client-based legal services organizations so they may best serve their constituencies. MLRI was incorporated in 1937 and began its legal services work in 1968.

MLRI's advocacy has been responsible for groundbreaking policies assisting low-income people. These include laws correcting the legal imbalance favoring landlords over tenants; utility service regulations and policies that are among the most favorable to residential customers in the U.S.; a law mandating changes in local zoning practices which has been directly responsible for the creation of more than 50,000 affordable housing units; nationwide class action relief safeguarding the right of persecution victims to work and obtain permanent status in the U.S.; numerous public assistance policies and procedures designed to protect people against unfair denials and terminations of their benefits; reforms to the state's Criminal Offender Record Information system; extensive litigation saving public benefits and health care programs from cutbacks; and an extremely successful effort to remove barriers to food stamp participation in Massachusetts.

In mid-2008, MLRI had advertised for a newly created housing attorney position. Housing was one of the areas our staff and board had identified as being chronically understaffed at MLRI. The unit has three housing attorneys, but two are part time. We had received resumes and were beginning to schedule interviews, when the news came that we were facing a 30% cut to our overall budget, due to the severe downturn in IOLTA collections in Massachusetts. Given that reality, we had no choice but to pull the advertisement and not fill the position. Our IOLTA grant may be further cut in 2010.

But while our resources are diminishing, the need for our work is increasing. Our housing work involves litigation, state and federal legislative advocacy, state and federal administrative advocacy, and training of attorneys, non-attorney housing advocates and tenants. While we focus on public and subsidized housing admissions and occupancy issues, Section 8 voucher policies, tenants in foreclosures, and fair housing, we also provide support to legal services advocates across the state in their eviction defense work. We are currently in the implementation phase of two settlements of class action fair housing lawsuits in eastern Massachusetts, which involve the relocation of our clients to quality housing in positive neighborhoods.

MLRI is offering to host a pro bono attorney here in our housing unit. The work is varied, from working directly with clients on relocation issues to helping create the content of the website we manage to support eviction defense work. There are ongoing legal research and writing projects for our administrative and legislative advocacy, and potential work doing administrative appeals.

While previous experience in any area of housing law is helpful, it is not essential. The ability to write clearly, work directly with low income clients, and do legal research are important. Any experience in litigation, real estate, or business law is helpful. The ability to speak Spanish would also be an important skill.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this proposal and we hope you consider this request.