

February 3, 2022

To whom it may concern:

My name is Amy Tannenbaum and I am a staff attorney at a civil legal services non-profit in Los Angeles, California; I write to you in my personal capacity. Our organization provides a range of civil legal services in the areas of eviction defense, immigrants' rights, consumer justice, veteran's rights, community development, and children's rights. I specifically work on a team providing eviction defense to low-income tenants; we handle all stages of litigation in the fast-paced context of unlawful detainers, including discovery, motions, depositions, and jury trials.

In May 2019, our non-managerial staff – non-supervisory staff attorneys and fellows, social workers, paralegals, intake coordinators, and administrative assistants, among others – unionized as a local of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). We signed our first contract with management in June 2021. I have personally been active in our local, including serving on its first two executive boards and sitting on the negotiations committee.

Becoming a union shop, and having the right to collectively bargain with our employer, has had an enormously positive impact on my personal work experience and that of my colleagues. Our choice to unionize as a bargaining unit reflected longstanding problems in the workplace that left workers feeling undervalued and that made it difficult to recruit and retain quality attorneys and paraprofessionals. Prior to unionizing, many of our staff members spent a great deal of time and energy advocating for their needs individually, or trying to convince management to enact even incremental changes to work policies that would make our work much easier. The process of collective bargaining allowed us to delegate much of that work to a dedicated negotiations committee. Ultimately, through collective bargaining, we attained benefits like increased pay scales, translation pay for staff who regularly use a language other than English on the job, improvements to parental leave and spouse and dependent insurance coverage, and compensatory time for exempt employees. We have also been able to work collaboratively with management to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as implementing an office vaccination policy. In sum, collective bargaining has resulted in significant improvements to our working conditions and compensation, and has greatly improved morale amongst staff.

A top benefit that accrues from collective bargaining is contracting for compensation and benefits that match area and industry standards and reflect the needs of attorneys, legal workers, and support staff. This helps civil legal services offices to retain the skillful and trained attorneys they have on staff, providing clients with continuity of representation and making it more likely that staff will stay at the organization long-term to bring those years of experience to bear for their clients. It also helps to recruit talented new staff, who appreciate not only being compensated in accordance with the value they will bring to the organization and to clients, but also the intangible value of working in a union shop where workers have collective bargaining rights.

From my experience with my own union and observing the experiences of many colleagues at other unionized civil legal services organizations and public defender offices, attorneys and legal

workers at these offices provide the same, if not better, quality of representation to clients than those at non-union shops. Just cause protections give us peace of mind as we work tirelessly to serve our clients, coming up with creative solutions to difficult problems. When issues arise with our working conditions, the time and energy that we previously would have used to advocate for ourselves or to try to fix the problem can be spent on client services; now, our union representatives help us find a solution with management. And the transparency around compensation, evaluations, and promotions helps reduce staff anxiety, allowing us to focus on the fast-paced, high-stakes legal services we provide. In other words, collective bargaining helps us stay focused on the reason we all took these jobs: the work we do for our clients.

For these reasons, I strongly urge you to support HB 90/SB 255. The hard-working staff of the Maryland Office of the Public Defender would greatly benefit from this change, and it will help them continue to provide high-quality representation to their clients.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amy Tannenbaum".

Amy Tannenbaum