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I spent the summer working as a researcher for Tenants and Workers United (TWU), a membership-based organization that fights for the rights of low-income residents of Northern Virginia to decent housing, fair working conditions, and adequate public services. TWU draws its membership from the area's large and growing immigrant communities – from Central and South America, East Africa, and Central and South Asia – as well as low-income African American residents. The organization grew out of an effort to prevent one thousand low-income residents from losing their homes in the mid 1980s when they were threatened with eviction from their apartment buildings. Ten years later, residents formed the Arlandria-Chirilagua Housing Cooperative, a 300-unit limited equity cooperative, with TWU providing technical assistance.

From tenant organizing, the members of TWU moved on to win victories in areas such as expanded access to health care for uninsured immigrants, bilingual services at the major local hospital, an innovative and popular dual-language program at the Mt Vernon Community School, increased reimbursement and support for childcare providers in Alexandria and the creation of local “living wage” laws in Alexandria and Arlington. In addition the group provides advice, referrals and training to new immigrants on navigating the public school and health care systems. The group, run by a small, dedicated staff, is now “chapter-based” with chapters in several different areas of Northern Virginia.

The low income immigrants and African-American residents of Northern Virginia that make up TWU's membership tend to fill service sector jobs as gardeners, construction laborers, health care attendants and restaurant employees. As housing costs have soared well beyond the stagnant, low wages that these jobs provide, members have faced increasing difficulty paying for their homes. Many have been forced to move farther away from their jobs, adding costly and time-consuming commutes on the already over-burdened highways that feed suburban sprawl south of Washington DC. The affordable housing crisis threatens to scatter the communities that TWU supports, dispersing leaders and making organizing more difficult at the same time that the longer commutes and high fuel prices combine to reduce disposable income and decrease the time workers can spend with their families.

My research sought to address the displacement threatening TWU's members, concentrating on the problem of affordable housing. The goal was to prepare materials about the politics and economics of the local housing market that would allow TWU to make informed decisions about how best to help its members stay in their communities. In particular, I looked at programs and conditions in Fairfax County, a relatively affluent area that had experienced enormous job growth and a spike in housing costs over the last five years. This growth is only expected to increase, since a government-mandated military base relocation will bring over twenty thousand new employees to Fort Belvoir, a base in the south eastern portion of the county by 2011, further increasing development pressure in the area.

Virginia state law severely limits the scope within which local jurisdictions can act in areas such as land use and zoning. (Virginia is a "Dillon's Rule" state, meaning powers are reserved to the state government unless explicitly granted by state law to localities.) As a result, strategies to set aside land and raise funds for affordable housing have frequently run into legal

challenges from developers who have won rulings declaring mandatory policies along these lines as “takings.” The piecemeal nature of local law generated by the need to get authorization for each county or town action means that affordable housing victories achieved in one jurisdiction are difficult to transfer to another area. Arlington, for example, received permission this summer to institute a schedule of fees and set-asides from all private developers for moderate and low cost housing. The same system would not be legal in neighboring Fairfax County, which faces similar pressures on its housing market. My research on nation-wide best practices for generating affordable housing involved considerable time spent combing through Virginia state law and the Fairfax County zoning ordinance to determine the relevance of outside examples to Fairfax’s particular legal context. The recommendations in my final report relied on this legal research as well as analysis of the local political situation.

During the course of my research, I had the opportunity to work with two experienced and inspirational TWU staff members who were also focused on housing. With one of them, I attended a series of community meetings as he gathered support from residents, church leaders, and civic organizations for the cause of affordable housing in Northern Virginia. With the other, I helped map out the various programs and decision-making processes related to housing in Fairfax County. On my own, in addition to the best-practices survey mentioned above, I conducted interviews with housing advocates and nonprofit developers in order to gain a better understanding of how government interacted with the market to produce the situation faced by low-income residents trying to pay their rent.

On several occasions throughout the summer I had the chance to leave my desk and participate as a volunteer for TWU events. These provided me with some of my most memorable experiences since they gave me the chance to talk with and learn from TWU members and to

interact more closely with staff. Early on in the summer, for example, I participated in the annual festival that TWU sponsors as a celebration of local Latino/a culture and an organizational fundraiser. The day-long Saturday event was filled with food and music and booths with groups ranging from banks to car dealerships to service providers to the local branches of the political parties – anyone seeking to connect with the immigrant community in and around Alexandria. I had thought I would be asked to set up chairs or do some other type of manual work, but instead I was handed a thick stack of paper and told to gather survey information from the almost entirely Spanish-speaking crowd.

I had deliberately chosen to work with an organization that would help me improve my Spanish, but I felt a bit daunted as I headed out into the crowd after learning from a new friend how to say “¿Desculpe, seria tan amable de llenar este pequeña encuesta?” (Excuse me, would you be so kind as to fill out this small survey?) Most people were quite kind, but even so, my stack of filled-out surveys grew slowly. At some point, two of the TWU members that had volunteered to help set up tents came to check on me and, seeing the progress I had made, grabbed some of the surveys and began stopping every passing family until almost all the papers were filled in. Our work that day led to many more conversations, allowing me to work on my Spanish, teach a bit of English and exchange stories about our various backgrounds. The relationships I developed with TWU members and with the staff gave me an increasingly profound appreciation for the struggles faced by low-income immigrant workers and a stronger determination to make my future work useful to them.

The Liman Fellowship enabled me to offer TWU in-depth research capacity to which it would not otherwise have had access, given its extremely limited resources and overstretched

staff. I was able to leave behind a set of materials on affordable housing that the organization can use as it continues to work for a better quality of life for its membership.

This fall, I returned to Princeton for the second year of my two-year Masters degree in public policy with a focus on economics and urban development. After graduating, I hope to find work at an organization similar to TWU – one that combines organizing with research, legal analysis and advocacy to achieve better living conditions for low-income workers. As development pressures continue to draw jobs to the suburbs and push up housing prices in previously affordable neighborhoods, the people working to provide services used by more affluent residents will increasingly face difficulties achieving a decent quality of life for their own families. My experience with TWU allowed me to explore this challenging problem and solidified my commitment to working on local economic development issues as a way to advance economic justice.