

# John Howard Society of Nova Scotia:

By Travis Nikkel

The John Howard Society of Nova Scotia (JHSNS) is a subsidiary of the national organization The John Howard Society of Canada. The society focuses on responses to issues of crime, prison reform, and reintegration. The John Howard Society mission is “effective, just, and humane responses to the causes and consequences of crime.” Following this mission the society works on its core values of working with people who have come into conflict with the law; reviews, used for evaluation and advocating for changes in the criminal justice process; engaging in public education on matters relating to criminal law and its application; and promoting crime prevention through community and social development activities. The John Howard Society focuses mainly on male clients, but provides service to anyone who needs it. The work done is complimented by the Elizabeth Fry Society, which is a society with a similar mandate, but with a focus on women.

My involvement through POLI 4390 at JHSNS involved work on a number of different projects. The office in Halifax for the central region of Halifax is quite small, but has a lot of work to accomplish. These tasks included helping with the employment search support program, record suspension program, the community work placement program, the community work team program, a fundraising project, a book drive, and multiple research projects.

The employment search support program is a service offered to clients of the John Howard Society to assist in searching for employment after incarceration. There are many

challenges involved with finding employment with a criminal record. In assisting with this program, I sat in on a meeting with a client in which a JHSNS employee assisted the client in creating a resume and where to look for postings. As well, information on what industries and what employers are more likely to not require a criminal record check are available to be provided to clients. There is also a responsibility in these meetings to control expectations as job searches are a frustrating endeavour for most people and even more so for those with criminal records. Unfortunately, due to the types of industries in which someone with a record is likely to find work you also need to control expectation regarding expected wages. After sitting in on this meeting I ran two of my own meetings with clients in which I provided details on the areas explained above as well as some hints on how to write an effective cover letter. Another meeting involved a lot of expectation control as the client was looking for work that would allow him to have a less tempting and stressful work environment, but this transition would likely result in a wage reduction.

The record suspension program is a service offered to clients of the John Howard Society to assist in the application for a record suspension. A record suspension, formerly known as a pardon, is available to people who have completed their sentence, including all fines and stipulations of their sentence (like community service hours) and have proven themselves to be law-abiding citizens during a prescribed number of years following the completion of the sentence. The record suspension removes the criminal record from Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) database. This does not eliminate the criminal charge, but makes removes it from criminal record checks opening up more opportunities for employment and education. For this program I sat in on meetings with clients and took notes. There is a lot of misinformation about records suspensions available to people. A lot of the meetings involved discussions and

clarifications about the wait periods and costs of the record suspension program. The cost of the record suspension application is currently one of the largest barriers. The cost increased from \$50 to \$631 recently. This creates a cyclical issue that can contribute to structural recidivism. Many clients cannot afford the application because they do not have work and they need the record suspension to get work.

The community workplace program is a service offered to clients of the John Howard Society to assist in the completion of sentence requirements, specifically community service hours. The central regional office of JHSNS has a database of organization that are willing to take in people with criminal records looking to complete service hours as a part of a sentence. This program works to connect these organizations to the individuals needs to complete hours. My involvement with this program was mostly with the database. I spent a large portion of my first three weeks at the office making phone calls to former placements and potential placements to determine if there was work available at these locations. Beyond this there was work that required determining organizations that would be a good fit given the requirements of the clients (location, type of work) and the organizations (types of charges, reliability) and contacting both the client and organization to see if they can complete hours there.

The community work team program is a service offered to clients of the John Howard Society that is similar to the community workplace program. The difference with this program is that the work being done is specifically supervised by JHSNS staff/volunteers. The type of work is varying and can be specific projects from community organizations or something setup by JHSNS specifically. With my involvement in this program we setup a project through JHSNS. I organized roadside cleanups, as JHSNS has an agreement with adopt-a-highway. This project

involved myself calling the Halifax transportation office to acquire a litter cleanup permit and supplies for the cleanup from the office. It was also required, along with other volunteers, to contact JHSNS clients who had connected with our community work placement program to see if they would like to participate in these events. I then attended and supervised two roadside cleanups.

The JHSNS central office had two student placements during this and we had a couple of joint projects. The first one of these projects was a fundraiser to create a fund to help clients acquire identification documents. These documents are nearly essential in today's world to find employment, housing, or social services, so access to these pieces of identification are very important for their clients to reintegrate successfully. We were given the task of coming up with and executing a plan for this fundraiser as an independent project of our placement. After a few brainstorming sessions, the other placement and myself determined that a 50/50 draw at the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) women's national soccer championships hosted by King's College in Halifax this year. In order to run this even we had to contact the coordinator of the championships to request permission, following this we had to acquire a gambling license from the government to run the event, and finally all the supplies had to be gathered for the draw. We attended two of the final games and sold tickets raising funds.

The other joint project that we had was to run a book drive for the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility (CNSCF). JHSNS has been helping to facilitate a book club at this facility recently and through this program they have discovered that there is a desire by many of the inmates to have access to more books. I pursued an arrangement with the Halifax Public Libraries, while the other placement pursued a book drive through Dalhousie. My

communications with the Public Libraries put me in contact with the librarian facilitating the book club at CNSCF. In discussions with her we determined that because of the knowledge she has regarding the requests of the inmates and the access to library resources that to establish a plan where she would set aside appropriate materials through the libraries weeding process to be picked up by JHSNS at a later date. This conversation also provided us with a more definitive guideline for what materials will be put to the greatest use at the facility. While I was doing this, the other placement was in contact with Dalhousie and arranged for a book drive to be run at the Student Union Building. We both will attend and run the book drive.

Along with the project that I was able to work on described above, I was also given four research projects to work on. The first one of these projects was to update the community directory for the Annapolis Valley Region. This project involved me looking at the existing directory for this region and others and determine what is potentially lacking in the directory. I then spent a number of days researching programs and services that could be added to the directory. While doing this project I noticed an inconsistency in the formatting of the different directories, so I also reformatted the Valley directory to be consistent with the other directories. While, reformatting I also made the file easier to navigate for future use.

The second research project I was given was to provide a report on how victims are currently involved in the criminal justice system. Many days were spent on this project researching the roles, responsibilities, and rights of victims in the criminal justice system. The services, programs, and governments for victims were also research extensively. A report with existing programs, like restorative justice and government legislation like the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights and the Canadian Statement of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime.

The individual programming for victim involvement in different departments of the criminal justice process like HRM Police and RCMP victim services, Nova Scotia victim services, Nova Scotia Public Prosecution service, Correction Services Canada victim services, and Parole Board of Canada victim involvement was also included. Current issues with victim services described through a number research articles and surveys is included. Finally, current initiatives seeking to address some of the current issues of victim services including the recent allocation of additional funds for victim services in Nova Scotia and the introduction of a domestic violence court (DVC) in the HRM.

Building off the previous research project I was asked to complete a report about the development of the DVC in HRM. In this report I stated the current progress and history of this program including looking at case studies of DVC's in Sydney, N.S. and in British Columbia. Then current services for victims and perpetrators were determined. Lastly, the report included an identification and point of contacts for potential work with perpetrators as there are currently far less services available to them. Providing assistance at this level would be a substantive way to attempt to reduce recidivism of a similar type of crime.

The fourth research project I was given also built off the previous one as it was about the services available to special offender groups. These are groups that along with being offenders have specific circumstances that makes finding service even more difficult. These groups were sex offenders, offenders with long-term medical conditions/physical disabilities, and African Canadian offenders. For this report specific needs and considerations of each group were included in the report. Also included was the resources currently available to these groups within HRM and Nova Scotia. Addressing gaps and potential solutions was the final part of this report.

Additionally to these projects my time at JHSNS gave me other opportunities to learn and improve my knowledge in this field. This included naloxone training at Direction 180. This training showed myself and other JHSNS staff and volunteers how to administer naloxone to aid a person during an overdose and provided a window with enough time for emergency services to arrive. I also attended the workshop following the AGM of the East Coast Prison Justice Society. This workshop provided multiple prospective on a number of issues in criminal justice. There were presenters from academia, law practice, a former prisoner, the parole board, and corrections services.

I gained a lot from this placement. As someone who likes to be challenged JHSNS provided me with a fulfilling experience. The society gave both myself and the other placement a lot of work that kept me busy. The work was also not just specific student projects, but we were involved with the running of the society and their many programs. This allowed myself to get a good understanding of what working at a not for profit is really like. If anyone is considering taking this course I would recommend it. Additionally if anyone has any significant interest in the criminal justice system, its shortcomings, and those attempting to navigate their way through it I would also highly recommend looking to take a placement at the John Howard Society of Nova Scotia.