

Halifax Refugee Clinic

By Victoria Macies

The Halifax Refugee Clinic is a non-profit organization situated in the North end whose mandate is to provide free legal aid and support for refugees who cannot afford to pay for their own counsel and basic needs. The clinic has two main streams within their operation: legal, and social work. I had the pleasure of working there throughout the fall semester of this year and aiding in the legal aspects of the process. The wonderful part about this placement is the nature and importance of work they allow the students to be involved in, which I will lay out below.

The legal aspect is aid with the filing of the claim with the government and then preparing and providing counsel for their hearing date, in which their claim is heard by a board member and subsequently their refugee status is accepted or denied. This requires initially filing out a lot of standard paperwork issued by the government, and then completing the Basis of Claim form. The initial paperwork asks the claimant to account in as much detail as possible the last 10 years of their life, or since they were 18, depending on their age. They must also provide information about what schools, organizations both political and social, military positions or volunteering they have done, how they got to Canada, as well as list all family members they have.

The Basis of Claim form is what comes next, which is where the claimant tells their story and why they fear persecution if they are to return home. This can be on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group; these guidelines follow the United Nations official definition of a refugee. This is the chance for the claimant to elaborate on their story and provide details pertinent to their claim. Once these forms are

submitted, they receive a hearing date by the government which is typically months later, to present their claim in front of a board member whose job is to assess claims of refugee status.

Secondary, the Clinic helps the clients build a life here in Canada, which can range from helping with doctor's appointments, finding apartments, showing them around the city, finding jobs, or applying for income assistance. This part of the process is done by the social work staff, which includes many students from the field interning there. I am not as familiar with the social work aspect, but I have a pretty good idea as my officemate was a social work student for the clinic.

As a political science student, I was working on the legal parts of the process. I was privileged enough to help out with the process up to the claimant's hearing. When I first began my time there I would make exhibit lists of information and material I would find on the internet to back up the claimant's story and provide proof. This could come from news sources, blogs, or any other type of source I could find to relate to their claim. I also got to annotate some of these exhibit lists. This is where I would pull the relevant quotes from these sources to make it easier on the pro bono lawyers helping on the case as they do not have the time to sift through the vast amount of pages that are involved in a claim.

I also helped annotate what are called National Documentation Packages (NDP's); these are a collection of reports and findings that the government makes for each country, outlining the basic information as well as the various issues and cleavages present in the country. As these packages often contain dozens of lengthily reports, students would also find relevant passages from these documents as well. Sifting through the NDPs and making exhibit lists was a very important learning experience for me. I can honestly say that I learned more about contemporary world politics more during my time at the clinic than I have in my four years at Dalhousie. This

isn't a slight to Dalhousie, it was just a great experience to be able to dedicate time throughout the week to learn about what is currently happening in nations all around the world.

This work gave me a whole new perspective on the world, and how far we still have to come to resolve many deeply entrenched issues. I not only submersed myself in the history and current affairs of the countries, I also learned about their cultures and different ways of life. This experience was further exacerbated when the Clinic had me working directly with the clients, helping them fill out their initial forms. I started out by helping clients fill out the basic elements of their forms, and gradually moved to interviewing the clients and documenting their stories. I conducted in-depth interviews with two clients and these were amazing and emotional experiences to partake in. On my last official day, I interviewed a client and got to hear their emotional and deeply personal story. I helped them for about four hours and this was the first time I had experienced a client tell an emotional story to me personally, this had a great impact on me and I am thankful that the Clinic was able to offer me the chance to do this.

I think it is almost impossible not to walk away from the Clinic and not have your empathy increase exponentially. It immerses you directly into the minutia of these conflicts and allows you to hear how countless people are personally affected. It is work that leaves you emotionally drained, but also thankful that you got to do your part in helping these people attain a better and safer life. I cannot recommend this placement enough to any political science student wishing to do their part in making a difference in the world.

What I would recommend to future students taking part in this placement is to do a lot of research prior to your placement about the refugee claiming process- which includes the volunteer legal counsel manual they send you which acquaints you very well with the process and the legal aspects to it. Furthermore, if they had the time, to take half an hour to familiarize

themselves with NDPs, and don't hesitate to ask questions, because it can be a complicated process, but you can learn so many invaluable things. There are so many different dynamics involved in this process and so much information to be learnt. I am so grateful for my time there and am privileged to have had the opportunity to meet and help so many wonderful and kind people.