

Clare Weir Parkin
My experience at the John Howard Society
B0074576
Dr. Margaret Denike
Tuesday, April 13th, 2021

My time at the NGO, John Howard Society, was a great experience. Their mission statement: “Effective, just, and humane responses to the causes and consequences of crime”, was truly recognized seen during my placement there. Their mission statement says it all, but the society aims to help men, women, and people to move forward with their lives after tumultuous events. John Howard helps with record suspensions, employment opportunities, affordable housing, and other programs to support clients. At first, things were somewhat disorganized and it was difficult to orient myself, but by the end of the placement, I had learned a lot, and forged some really great networks.

The first week was mostly about orientation and reading. I spent the 7 hours reading information about what JHS is, how it helps communities, what services they provide, and how they provide them. I was told that although mostly online, it would be good for me to come to JHS in Lower Sackville to meet everyone and see what the workplace looks like. I was introduced to a couple programs including “Anger Management and Emotional Intelligence” (AMEI), “Healthy Relations” (HR), and someone who works there, who found out about JHS through the POLI4390 placement, gave a presentation on “Record Suspensions”, formerly known as “Pardons”. During these presentations, I had the opportunity to ask several questions, and the staff was very helpful.

AMEI is a program whose participants are often mandated by the domestic violence court to be there. The goal is to help the people involved in the program to find healthy ways of expressing anger, and better methods of communication. Because of the nature of the program,

the groups are not co-ed, and mostly men sign up so there are mostly male groups, with intermittent groups for women's anger management. I was told this week that I could be a co-facilitator or support to the facilitator for this program.

HR is a program that is targeted at people who need help with forming relationships in their lives. These relationships include close family and friend relationships, as well as relationships with acquaintances and even strangers (i.e. the checkout person at the grocery store).

Finally, the Record Suspension program deals with people who have charges against them that they are looking to have suspended. Charges can be suspended after 5 years for a summary charge, and after 10 years for an indictable charge. However, all fees, fines, and time served must be paid or completed before the time can start. Record suspensions are expensive and they take about 1.5 years to complete. They can be done on one's own, but NGOs such as the JHS can help to make the process clearer, and more likely to be accepted. A rejected application for record suspension does not mean you get your money back, so JHS's assistance can be very important for many people.

While I did not participate in all of these programs, they are something that students in the future could participate in. I did participate in the AMEI program, which made up most of my hours in the placement. However, I did not get more involved in that until several weeks in, so I will get back to that later.

I was provided a task list at the beginning of my placement with a number of tasks that I could complete on my own time. I did not complete the items on the list, nor was I expected to. The tasks I completed were: updating the Hotel & Motel Accommodations file, and a research file which focused on shelters and affordable housing.

Updating the Hotels and Motels file involved calling most of the hotels and motels in the Halifax, Dartmouth, and Bedford areas, and asking them about their nightly, weekly and monthly prices. I also asked them about their amenities and any other services they provided to those staying at their residences. This task would be something that students could be expected to do in the future, as rates are constantly updated for hotels and motels in the HRM.

The research file was a lot larger than the hotels and motels file. Originally the file started out at approximately 8-10 pages of information that was both disorganized and lacking. I spent several hours on this file, formatting it properly, and patching the holes in the research. I called shelters, low-income housing programs, government programs and halfway houses. I asked shelters about their availability, their referral process, and any other needs they had in order to get clients checked in. What I learned, though I already knew, is that there is a severe housing crisis in Halifax. There was very little availability at the shelters, and volunteers and employees were stretched.

The affordable housing led to the same understanding. I called them to ask about rates, referrals, and any other details about their programs. Many of these programs provided meals to their clients, and other community involvement opportunities.

The government programs I called included a heating subsidy from Nova Scotia Power, as well as rebate for low income families, also from Nova Scotia power. The final fund was “Many Small Things” which is a new fund, created in the wake of COVID-19, for families in need of relief.

Finally, I called some half way houses to ask similar questions, though there were far more requirements for applications.

The bulk of my work was done with the AMEI program, facilitated by SJ Rogers. They were very helpful and I really enjoyed working with them, future students should look forward to working with them. SJ gave very clear instructions and always responded to my emails in a timely manner.

The first round of the AMEI program was virtual due to COVID-19 restrictions. We used google meet to meet with clients and complete their intakes. Each intake session was individual and took approximately 45 minutes. Ideally AMEI is supposed to have 10 participants, and in our intakes, we did speak to 10, but when it came to the virtual group sessions only four people showed up. The virtual sessions were interesting and I learned a lot about myself, my own emotions and how to deal with anger. There was an intake for each participant, then there were four main sessions, followed by an individual session. One thing to caution any students who are interested in this position: a lot of really heavy things come up when talking to participants. I talked to many folks referred from domestic violence court, these stories in particular can be difficult to hear.

In the intakes, we spoke to each client about the situation which had led to them enrolling in AMEI. For some it was mandatory, from court. For others it was a series of behaviours that had led them to realize they needed some help, or recommendation from a loved one. We then gave them a needs assessment (going over their shelter, security, food, medications, mental health, and more). We then did a commitment form with them to ensure that they would show up, as the waitlist for AMEI is extremely long.

We had four group sessions which covered emotional intelligence, stress management, communication, and anger management. I mostly just took notes during the virtual sessions, and SJ facilitated. The online format made it difficult for it to be done any other way. I did not

participate very much in the virtual sessions. At the end of each session, we would talk about each person 'big takeaway' from the week, and something they were looking forward to in the coming week.

The last week was making case plans with the clients. These case plans included talking about what clients had gained from the sessions, in which ways they thought they had grown, and what they would do to improve the course. We spoke about goals for the future, and the timelines of those goals.

The last part of the virtual session was writing the court reports. For each of the people who were referred to the program from the domestic violence court, we had to provide a report for the court which touched on their participation, their growth, and their demeanour in session. From taking notes all throughout the program, I was able to write court reports pretty easily. I only had to write two for the virtual group. It took about one hour per report.

In starting the next round of AMEI, I had a more active role. SJ instructed me to make the phone calls to clients to book them in for their intake sessions, which I did, making sure to turn off the caller ID on my cellphone. Each call only took about ten minutes, and all of the clients were easy going. This round of AMEI took place after some COVID-19 restrictions had lifted, so we were able to meet in person, which was a much better experience for me, and the clients.

The intakes took place at the Alderney Gate library in Dartmouth. We had individual sessions, similarly to the first round of AMEI, but the participants were much more likely to open up and give us the full story when the intake was in person. This time around, we had nine participants in the session.

During intakes we encountered people who had suffered from mental illness, systemic racism, and addictions. Each of these things was difficult to hear about, but it was extremely

important in order to get the full story. I learned a lot about the intersections of crime and poverty. The intakes mostly passed by without a hitch, however we had one client who was unwilling to take accountability, hostile, and combative, which was very difficult to deal with, as I did not have any formal training on the matter. However, SJ was always very good to debrief with, and make sure I was feeling okay at the end of sessions.

When the group sessions started, all but one person showed up each time, meaning we had 9 people in the session. This time I was facilitating the program, which was fine with me as I had a facilitators guide, videos, and PowerPoint notes to use which helped enormously. SJ let me take on the role of the lead facilitator which was a great experience, and they were always glad to provide me with constructive feedback. In the group sessions, there were very clearly some folks who wanted to be there, and some folks who did not. It was very nice to see that seven of the nine had really opened up by the time the program ended.

Dealing with the combative participant was definitely the most difficult thing I experienced during my placement. Due to the fact that many participants are mandated to be there, they are resistant to open up. As a facilitator we do many exercises where we “go around the room” and everyone chimes in. It can become difficult when a participant is combative because it throws off the atmosphere for the others in the group, so as a facilitator you have to find the balance between pushing too hard, and not pushing hard enough.

During the case plan week, I was given 4 case plans to do on my own. SJ and I split them up, meaning that I was able to talk to clients and go over their goals, feelings, and achievements on my own. I then wrote their court reports, and that concluded the second round of AMEI and my hours with John Howard Society.

Overall, this placement was a good experience for me, and I encourage others to take this opportunity. Communication was good, the work was interesting, and I met a lot of very nice people.