

Written Report: Practicum at Court Services

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Introduction

This written report will explore my time and experience at the Department of Court Services in Nova Scotia (NS). I will begin by introducing myself and my interests, why I chose to take this course, what my experience was like working with Court Services NS, and finally what I learned and gained from this experience.

Who I am

To fully grasp why I chose to complete my practicum at court services, I need to introduce myself. My name is Mena Araim, I am a 21-year-old fourth-year political science student at Dalhousie University. I enrolled at Dal in September 2018 and will be graduating in the upcoming month of May 2022. I was always interested in Law and politics, yet I was undeclared until my second year as I took many varying courses within the social science subfields and decided that political science is what I am most interested in. I consider myself to be quite a busy person as I've kept up with three part-time jobs while being a full-time student for the past four years. During my second year, the infamous COVID-19 pandemic hit, and online classes became a reality. For many like myself, the shift to online class was extremely difficult, education simply became a screen in my bedroom, I felt disconnected from the real world and the ability to meet people with the same interests as me and those at similar stages in life was non-existent. This was especially hard as I was hoping to begin volunteering within my field during the summer, which was simply not possible as organizations were not accepting new hires, especially not students as they have shifted online. This was rather discouraging as I had hoped to build a reasonable resume and gain experience in my field to apply to law school.

Why I chose to Take this Course

As class registration approached close to the end of the third year, I stumbled across POLI4390, after exploring what the course is about on the Dalhousie website I was extremely interested but had slight concerns about how I could fit eight hours a week into my already busy weeks. I decided to email and express my interests in the course, following that I had an extremely helpful and accommodating interaction via email with the course coordinator, Dr. Margret Denike. The process was simple, I explained my interest in the course and how it would benefit my goals post-graduation, along with that I submitted my top three placement picks from an extremely long list of organizations, it was quite difficult to narrow my choices down to only three as many of the placements were extremely interesting and mostly related to my interest with respect to my political background and interest in getting into law school in the near future. Following that, I have simply matched up at a placement with the Department of Justice and Court Services NS, I was introduced via email to my supervisor Claudia Mann.

After contacting my supervisor I was extremely excited as she was welcoming and helpful, we discussed what a typical day would look like and what would be expected of me. We agreed on a day that I would be completing my weekly hours which are Wednesdays from 9 am-4 pm each week.

My Experience Working with the Department of Court Services

When January hit, and placements began to take place the COVID-19 outbreak in NS was at yet another peak, therefore I was completing my placement hours from home, while this was not ideal it was temporary. My first three weeks were very introductory, which I appreciated as I was not familiar with the placement's significance within the community. I was introduced to

the rest of the team, underwent confidentiality agreements, criminal record checks, and an enhanced security check questionnaire with a police officer via zoom. This was a great experience as I had not done a criminal record check before, nor had I undergone an enhanced security check questionnaire interview. The interview was quite interesting, I was asked to be in full view with my hands showing and answered a set of 50 questions that ranged from who I was as a person, things I've done or haven't done, my views on certain things, what my social media is like, etc. This is the type of information and security procedures that are required from all government employees and it certainly was very interesting to experience, given the nature of government work there are strict confidentiality agreements, therefore, I am unable to provide much detail about the interview questions.

During my first 3 weeks, I learned a lot about the department of Court Services as they are dedicated to providing service and ensuring fair and accessible administration of justice to all. During my first three weeks, I learned a lot about the domestic violence (DV) court and domestic violence as a whole. Domestic violence is considered to be any power one may have over another causing deliberate abuse, this court dealt with intimate partners and it can be any couple in a relationship despite marital status.

I learned about how the DV court began, starting in Sydney in 2012 after the George Maxwell suicide tragedy, this raised awareness and there were offered recommendations to start a court program that embodied several guiding principles such as safety, focusing on people's needs, strict commitment to cultural humility and inclusion, ensuring its collaboratives, etc. I learned that the DV court has eligibility criteria, that being individuals need to be 18 years of age or older, they must live within the HRM region, they must voluntarily participate in the DV court

program, they must plead guilty to their charges, and accept responsibility for their actions, undergo an assessment to ensure they are a good fit for the program and finally obtain the crown and judges consent to consider proceeding the matter into DV court. In addition, when an individual is accepted into DV court they are obligated to sign consent and waiver forms that highlight their guilty plea which can stand in court and highlight the fact that they are voluntarily applying to the DV court. When individuals enter the DV court program they are ensured a legal representative which can be a private lawyer or a designated legal aid defense council, which in the case of HRM is Matt Darrah. I also briefly learned about the types of sentencing in DV court, typically when an individual is accepted into the program they are required to complete certain rehabilitation programs and therapy sessions depending on their case, how well they do in these programs depends on their sentencing, they can be granted absolute discharge where they are expunged from the criminal record after 1 year, they can have a condition discharge where they are expunged from the criminal record after three years, they can be sentenced to peace bonds for 12 months or they can be sentenced to probation orders. This court is in place to enable DV cases to have a chance to learn, grow and rehabilitate to ensure safe, healthy future relationships, the point is to help and not punish.

What did my day-to-day look like?

Now that I provided an understanding of the DV court program, I will go into detail about what my day-to-day looked like. During the first four weeks, I would have morning meetings via zoom with my supervisor who explained my daily tasks. These tasks ranged from editing documents, re-writing policy, watching videos and learning about the DV court program and its importance, and going to and sitting in on DV court hearings. I was unable to have access

to government files during the first four weeks as I was completing my hours online, which meant I did not have access to a government computer. Following the four weeks, I began going into the office which is located downtown on Hollis street, I was provided with a small office for myself with a government computer, on my first day in the office I was able to set up my government email, my computer and I was provided with my government ID badge to enter and exit the building. Following that, I started working on two projects, my first project was to edit the criminal code review board (CCRB) document, this included updating the membership board. In addition, I conducted research with respect to an issue that had been brought up within the team. There are issues with public criminal code review boards, when an individual is found not criminally responsible the respectable treatment is done, and then they have a right to a hearing. There are board members appointed by the government, people such as lawyers and psychiatrists with that, hearing schedules, members, unidentified youth cases, and individuals under the care of the board are all public knowledge. There are final dispositions and dispositions that are ongoing, although there are no policies with respect to the removal of disposition when absolute discharge is completed. Therefore, all dispositions are available for the public eye in Nova Scotia, whether an absolute discharge is granted or not. This is clearly problematic as it hinders individuals from moving on. Part of my research on this issue was to assess other provinces' dispositions and how readily available they are. I chose to look at New Brunswick, Manitoba, Newfoundland, and Saskatchewan as they are relatively similar to Nova Scotia's size. After conducting my research it was found that NS was the only province that kept public records of absolute discharge cases. I proposed that when dispositions are completed resulting in an absolute discharge, the disposition should be removed as it may prevent people from moving

on physically and emotionally in their lives. While public concern and safety are valid, individuals who are considered to have an absolute discharge are not of harm to the public and therefore should not have to suffer the ongoing trauma by making these dispositions readily available to the public eye.

The second project I worked on was listening in on 2018 DV court hearings and creating a chart that outlined simple facts about cases and outlined the judge's ruling, this chart will be used to take into account what the common sentencing is, which is 2018's case was absolute discharges as most individuals who voluntarily join the DV court program are willing to get the help they need, do well and result in an absolute discharge.

I enjoyed working at court services NS, I felt as though I was appreciated and seen as more than just a "student". I was able to build relationships with people working in the office and get some great advice with respect to where to go from here. My favorite part about this placement currently has to be being able to sit in at the domestic violence court hearings, while I'm unable to share information on the cases themselves due to confidentiality agreement, it was extremely interesting to see and hear people's sides of stories as well as judges decisions and how some of the accused react. Although with the nature of courts some cases simply were hard to hear, especially when discussing domestic violence within relationships.