

Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia  
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Since the beginning of January 2022, I have been volunteering at the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia. EFry is a non-governmental organization that focuses on providing aid primarily to women and gender diverse individuals that have been victimized by the criminal justice system. The specific kinds of aid services they provide can range from legal representation in court, to help filling out legal documents, to providing information on standard legal procedures. EFry also runs housing programs for women and girls in Nova Scotia that are, or may be, at risk of becoming criminalized. Holly House is a transition house run by EFry that provides temporary housing for criminalized women, while EFry staff work to develop a more temporary and sustainable living situation for the client. Additionally, EFry runs an advocacy program to ensure the safe transition of formerly incarcerated women back into the community. EFry only has a handful of full-time paid staff, while the majority of their work is done by volunteers and Dalhousie law students.

For the most part, my role at EFry is to do research, although it was not limited to simply that. My first couple of weeks involved introductory meetings with one of the full-time social workers, Laura, who would act as my mentor for the remainder of my placement. She allowed me to shadow her during her meetings to get an idea of the work that she does at EFry. Laura's position is in conjunction with the East Coast Prison Justice Society (ECPJS), which is another NGO that does similar work to EFry, but focusing more on incarcerated men. One of the support services offered by ECPJS and EFry is a phone line that connects directly to prisons in Nova Scotia where incarcerated individuals can call in and report any mistreatment or resource they are lacking. I was able to sit in on the weekly Zoom meetings to discuss any outstanding phone

calls received by Laura and the other ECPJS representative. However the phone call service is not just limited to incarcerated individuals, as Laura often gets calls from (mainly) women asking questions about legal procedures that they are involved in, whether EFry can provide any help, what legal forms must they fill out and how, etc. In terms of volunteer work, Laura had me participate in an advocacy training program in conjunction with the John Howard Society, as well as conduct research into the different programs, resources, and organizations available for survivors of sexual assault in the Maritime Provinces, specifically in New Brunswick. I was able to compile a database of information that listed names of centres, eligibility of clients, and the exact services that they provide.

I was given access to certain resources to familiarize myself with, such as a handbook circulated to prisoners in Nova Scotia prisons informing them of their human rights while incarcerated, a handbook detailing what to expect as an incarcerated individual, a trauma-informed tip guide, and even a manual defining “Habeas Corpus” (challenging the legality of an individual’s incarceration) and how to go about the legal procedure. Among all the resources, perhaps one of the most important cases I was told to look into was that of Carrie Low. In 2018, Carrie Low was drugged, abducted and raped by multiple men outside a bar in Dartmouth. Upon reporting the case to the Halifax police, Carrie was met with total contempt, as the police proved their unwillingness to take her case seriously through a series of paperwork delays and miscommunication, to say the least. Although Carrie continued to demand updates on the ongoing investigation, she never received any solid information and thus began keeping track of the many dead-end calls she made to highlight her growing lack of respect and frustration towards the Halifax police. Carrie eventually contacted EFry for legal aid and has been using their services for years now – as the four year anniversary of her assault approaches, her case is

nowhere near being closed, and there are still court dates set for the fall of 2023. Full details of Carrie's story can be listened to on the CBC podcast at <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/1029-carrie-low-vs>.

The details of Carrie's story are aggravating, and it is even more frustrating coming to terms with the fact that Carrie is not the only survivor of sexual assault to have their case improperly dealt with by the authorities. This is a true systemic injustice that the Carrie's legal team at EFry is working hard to bring to light, which I find to be very empowering. EFry has given not only given Carrie a support system, but the ability to create a platform to spread awareness for other survivors of sexual assault and survivor experts to speak about their experiences. I have the incredible opportunity to conduct research for one of the survivor expert initiatives that Carrie is involved with at EFry, along with a handful of other Maritime-based survivor experts. The initiative is called "On Our Terms", and it is about survivors taking control of their narrative within the legal system and using their personal experiences to evidence what changes need to be made. Laura and I have participated in the monthly meetings with all the survivor experts, as well as representatives from EFry societies across the Maritimes. My main job in this initiative is to conduct research on international programs and initiatives that exist in support of sexual assault and domestic violence survivors, as well as unconventional methods of crime reporting to protect the survivor.

The OOT meetings have been particularly engaging for me because never had I been able to hear firsthand survivors of sexual assault discuss their personal experiences with the legal system. Something one of the survivor experts mentioned in one of the meetings that will always stick with me was that there is no "justice" system. There is no justice in an unforgiving system that favours the privileged – it is merely a legal system. I had never really thought about how

inappropriate the word “justice” is as the name for a system that supposedly protects, while arguably there are more injustices created as a result of an inherently unjust system. I have now witnessed many instances of the legal system seemingly working against those implicated by it, through the use of confusing documents, and procedures that no one bothers to explain properly. Part of Laura’s job at Efry is literally to explain legal proceedings so a client can understand what is happening to them and what they must do. I can’t help but be grateful for the ability to see things from the survivor experts’ perspectives. Many of the survivor experts had similar ideas as to what needs to change within the legal system, despite having different experiences. Ultimately, the main concerns were that immediate measures must be taken when survivors report their cases, and that a formalized “justice” system simply does not cater to the needs of the survivors. The other point that was unanimously highlighted by the survivor experts was how they refused to have their identities whittled down to their assault, they want to be able to remove themselves from the trauma that threatens to define them. As someone on the outside, I can see how it is so easy to forget that a survivor of sexual assault does not become their assault, regardless of how hard they fight for justice. Someone like Carrie Low who is using her story as a platform to gain recognition, risks being constantly defined as what happened to her.

The other smaller research projects that I have been tasked with were a bit narrower in scope. I was asked to look into available funding for housing programs in Cape Breton for survivors of human trafficking, housing supports available in New Brunswick and Newfoundland, existing programs for working specifically with BIPOC survivors and survivor experts, and available funding to increase survivor expert pay. Although the main goal of this research was to build up a folder of information, I was able to learn a lot about what supports are available and how the provincial and federal governments may or may not play a role in those

supports. I was definitely impressed with the amount of resources available to survivors across the Maritimes, which honestly just goes to show how important it is to spread awareness about what is available for survivors. Ultimately, if no one knows what's available, then they can't get the necessary help.

Above all, my time volunteering at EFry has really allowed me to understand the pressures involved in working for an NGO. Whether in a paid position or not, everyone who works at EFry puts everything they have into their projects, despite some of the many challenges that may arise. Since EFry is an NGO, they rely heavily on grants to pay their limited staff, fund their housing programs, and run various initiatives. Without the grant money, EFry would not be able to function and countless individuals would be left without support. It is quite frustrating to watch everyone work so hard at EFry with the constant threat of a potential loss of funding hanging in the air.

I have enjoyed volunteering at EFry so much that I will continue to provide research and whatever help is need for as long as they need me. I will be continuing to conduct research for the OOT initiative, and I am also currently working with Laura to create an environmental scan of sexual assault programs and services offered in each state in the US. I would highly recommend EFry as a placement option as it is an incredibly supporting environment, with lots of freedom to conduct individual projects or offer help to existing projects. Especially for anyone with an interest in advocacy work, women's and gender diverse individual's rights, and the criminal justice system, there is plenty of opportunity to gain differing perspectives and ultimately fight against systemic injustices.