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In the fourth year of my Law, Justice, and Society degree I was given the opportunity to fulfill my 2021/2022 POLI 4390 winter term practicum at the Halifax Refugee Clinic. The Halifax Refugee Clinic (HRC) is a privately funded not-for-profit located in Halifax Nova Scotia. It was founded by immigration, refugee, and human rights lawyer Lee Cohen in 2000. The HRC was founded with the goal of ensuring those claiming refugee status, who are some of the most vulnerable and persecuted people in the world, receive the help they urgently need. The mandate of the HRC is ensure that the rights and integrity of those claiming refugee status in Nova Scotia are respected throughout their application and hearing process. They work to ensure fair opportunity for claimants while they present their cases to the refugee board by providing legal representation and resources.

Presently in Nova Scotia free legal aid is not available to refugee claimants, the HRC primary purpose is to fill this gap and provide that service which is sorely needed. The legal services offered by the HRC include, refugee claim consultations, practice hearings, research and counsel support throughout the claim process and more. The HRC also provides settlement services which include, but are not limited to, helping to access health care services, setting up bank accounts, setting up utilities, and providing employment counselling. The staff of the HRC are a mix of volunteers and paid staff all of whom work to support the organisations mandate. Many of the cases are taken on a pro bono basis by lawyers in the community who are then supported by volunteer council and HRC staff. My supervisor was Julie Chamagne the Executive

Director of the HRC. Julie was very enthusiastic, encouraging and accommodating throughout my practicum and always made me feel appreciated. She could be slightly difficult to reach at times due to her crazy schedule, but she always answered my questions and helped orient me through my work.

For my practicum I was not given one specific project to focus on, I largely supported staff and volunteer counsel in a research capacity. I was tasked with completing additional research or supporting document sorting on a case-by-case basis. When my practicum first began one of my primary tasks was National Document Package annotations. National Documentation Packages (NDP) are collections of supporting documents compiled by the IRB and divided by country of origin and area of concern. An NDP annotation requires reducing the claimant's basis of claim to specific concerns and then vetting the NDP of their country of origin for documents or sections of documents that support their specific claim. For example, if a claimant from Jamaica was making a claim based on persecution due to their sexual orientation the Jamaica NDP has a section dedicated to sexual orientation persecution in which supporting evidence can be found. But all the documents may not contain supportive information and my task was to read through and create an annotated bibliography pointed to where the most relevant information could be found.

I was also tasked with completing additional country context research, which entailed finding claim supporting documentation outside of the IRB NDPs. The additional documents were primarily news articles or academic studies which supported the relevant basis of claim. When I first began country context research the staff lawyer would tell me the specific research

points they needed evidence to support, but overtime they began sending the clients basis of claim form, which I would review and pull research points from. Additionally, due to the 100 support document page limit for refugee hearings I would sort the additional resources from most to least helpful to ease the process of narrowing down page counts.

Another form of research I was occasionally tasked with was compiling potential expert witness lists for claims that had limited documented evidentiary support available. In order to find potential experts, I would search news article and scholarly articles for authors or interviews with individuals who were knowledgeable on specific research points in the relevant country. I would then compile a list of the potential experts with their contact information, links to their works and a brief explanation as to why their testimony could be beneficial.

Working at the Halifax Refugee Clinic provided me with immense insight into the Canadian Refugee Determination Process. The experience was especially beneficial as I was simultaneously writing my Law, Justice, and Society Honours thesis on a Canadian Refugee Determination Process related issue. However, my practicum term was during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I therefore worked entirely remotely. We discussed me potentially coming in every second week but for health and safety reasons we decided to forego this option. Working remote meant I did not get the first-hand experience with clients or hearings that past practicum students may have. Despite knowing I was supporting something extremely important, working remotely made me still feel distant from the organization and those whose claims I was supporting.

As for my hours, we decided my workday would be Friday, in order to accommodate my class schedule and other commitments. Because I worked remote this only meant that I had to be available to contact for the open hours on Fridays and had to hold myself accountable for completing 7 hours each week. Since I did not go into the office, I largely worked in smaller increments throughout the week. My inconsistent schedule was also due to the timing of research requests, as hearings would sometimes have document due dates earlier in the week that I would have to abide by. The open-ended nature of my hours meant I needed to create timelines and deadlines for myself and share them with the staff whose request I was working on. It also meant occasionally turning down or pushing dates on requests as the staff did not communicate to one another whether they had given me a task. In addition, I worked through reading week as COVID-19 has pushed many hearings to be in the few weeks following reading week making it a busy time at the HRC. In the end of my practicum my supervisor had taken time off, leaving me without my main point of communication and my hours and tasks became limited. It was slightly disheartening as I would have liked to maintain the level of work I had previously been undertaking. However, I do not think this would have occurred had I been working in the office instead of online. In all, keeping my hours at the course required practicum amount entailed self-discipline as well as budgeting my time.

I am extremely grateful that I got the opportunity to complete my practicum at the Halifax Refugee Clinic. The knowledge I gained was invaluable and I feel extremely lucky to have had the chance to support the incredible work they do there.