

## **The Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia**

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The Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia is a non-profit organization that operates as a division of The Elizabeth Fry Society of Canada. The organization's primary focus is to enhance the lives of women, girls and gender-diverse individuals at risk of or involved in the criminal justice system. Elizabeth Fry provides various services, including casework services, free legal aid, and post-incarceration housing services for women. The organization also offers a range of programs, including the Personal Empowerment support program and gender-based violence groups that provide support assistance to women who have experienced gender-based violence, helping them heal and protect themselves from future harm. Elizabeth Fry offers employment and education programs to help women develop skills and knowledge to secure a stable future. This program has been extended to include the Elizabeth Fry thrift store, The Abundance Store, which serves as a compassionate employer for women learning and developing skills to enter the workforce. The organization aims to create a more equitable and just society where women and girls have equal opportunities to thrive and live free from violence and discrimination. The legal work carried out by Elizabeth Fry is done through their associated PATH legal office, which operates out of the same building as the Elizabeth Fry Society in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

If you have the opportunity to do your practicum placement at Elizabeth Fry, the first thing you'll probably hear is that they're not a crisis center, but they will never turn away anyone in crisis. This fact is critical, especially if you plan on being in person for this practicum, as I highly recommend it. Through this co-op practicum placement, I've had the chance to witness the initial stages of what it looks like for women entering the justice system. One common thread

that I first came into contact with from witnessing and hearing of the experiences of women coming into EFry, which is also relevant to my research and advocacy processes, is the term 'barriers'. Specifically, I will be discussing barriers for women throughout my report; these barriers apply in the legal, social, political and economic contexts.

For those pursuing their practicum, if you're interested in going to law school to pursue and promote social justice, the experiences you'll gain and hear about while working at Elizabeth Fry, in my opinion, will be incredibly motivating.

Lived experience is often considered a crucial component when working in non-governmental agencies like E Fry, and I admit that initially, I was quite nervous about this aspect. I was worried that my lack of experience could limit my ability to comprehend the issues properly and that it might impact my performance on the job. However, my supervisor, Laura Ferris, who runs the Women for Change program that is offered through the Domestic Violence Court Program, has been instrumental in helping me develop my skills and broaden my perspectives. Under her guidance, I have learned and grown tremendously in my role as an observer, researcher, and as a person.

One of my key takeaways from my practicum experience came from a conversation I had with Laura. She emphasized that people with lived experience bring valuable insight and knowledge to any organization or project. In particular, women with lived experience can provide a driving force that helps overcome the barriers of inexperience for those who haven't had similar experiences.

'Ergonomics' was the term Laura used to help me understand this concept. Ergonomics describes designing products and processes well suited to the people who use them. When creating programs or initiatives, gathering feedback from the people who will be using them is

essential. Laura taught me that creating programs without feedback is like designing a chair without testing it, which could result in a faulty and unsafe product.

This metaphor of the chair can be translated to real-life situations where assumptions about women's experiences can be inaccurate and potentially dangerous. It's important to recognize that different crises require different standards and approaches. It's essential to be adaptable and able to tailor responses to the specific needs of each situation rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach this is where consideration for social, legal, economic and political factors as well as many additional factors is incredibly relevant to the work carried out by those who work at EFry.

One of my initial primary responsibilities was to contribute to a project initiated by my co-op supervisor. This project involved formulating and compiling research to add to a database of resources available for women across the four Atlantic provinces. This database included information on services such as legal aid, legal advice, healthcare, mental health care, victim support services, and government agencies that provide assistance to women. Additionally, the database provided information on court systems that were specifically available for women, such as domestic violence courts, as well as where to access counselling and sexual assault centers. Another important aspect of my research focused on identifying what non-governmental organizations and culturally relevant services were available for women in these provinces. Furthermore, my primary focus was researching the various housing and support options available to women in these four provinces.

After settling into my initial task, I decided I wanted a more specific focus for my time at EFry. I came up with the project of creating an inclusive shelter guide, which would outline what women could expect when gaining residency within a particular shelter in a specific region. I found this project to be of utmost importance because, during my research, I discovered that not

only was there a lot of misinformation available on the internet, but it was also challenging to formulate a general idea of what women could expect when entering these shelters based on the information provided by a single resource. I had to go through four or five resources to find basic information on living conditions within the shelters, and this did not seem right to me. Therefore, my goal in creating these individualized province shelter guides was to ensure that women looking to access shelters had the basic information they needed to aid in their decision about whether or not it was the right place for them to go and gain shelter. These shelter guides would provide basic information about the shelters that would be necessary for someone trying to live there. For example, whether or not the shelter is pet or child-friendly or whether or not they accept previously convicted women. This information would help women make an informed decision about whether or not to choose a particular shelter as a safe haven.

However, during the process of creating the database and shelter guides, I realized the many barriers that exist for advocates trying to do research for people in positions needing resources, such as legal help, mental health help, help gaining residency, help transitioning out of incarceration, and help transitioning out of homelessness. There are so many barriers and blockades within the systems from the information provided by non-government entities all the way to governmental entities. It's difficult to be an advocate, and it's almost impossible to be the person in the position of needing any information given by advocates.

To demonstrate how difficult it is to navigate this system and how many barriers exist for women attempting to operate within this system, I will describe one of my experiences trying to get accurate information as an advocate. Part of my role as an advocate was to contact websites with inaccurate or out-of-date information or, inaccessible links that go nowhere and ask them to update the information or to exclude irrelevant information from their site as it is confusing to

those trying to access it. The inaccessibility of information is a form of inequity and a huge form of gender discrimination as it forces women to remain in dangerous, abusive, or unstable environments with no alternative. I approach my position when carrying out this research as a third-party representative in this process.

To properly articulate the difficulty of navigating the system and the barriers faced by women, I'll describe my attempt to verify information on a Federal government webpage about a women's homeless shelter in PEI. The webpage referenced a shelter that was no longer operational, but I wanted to confirm this with the webpage source to ensure that my database was accurate. I followed the contact link on the webpage, which directed me to the phone line directory of The Public Health Agency of Canada. No office numbers were listed for the Atlantic provinces, so I called the Ontario number, hoping to be directed to the appropriate contact. Instead, I was instructed to call Island information PEI, which had no options related to women's health or emergency shelters as they were a tourist services hotline. After several redirects and three hours on the phone, I was ultimately directed to the Women's Secretariat of PEI, who couldn't help me update the federal government webpage and suggested I email [info@pei.ca](mailto:info@pei.ca). I filed a complaint but never received a response. This was a frustrating and tedious process, and it left me feeling discouraged. However, I realized that my experience was minimal compared to someone who depends on that shelter or that information as their only option. This is the reality for many women, and it highlights the significant barriers they face.

Experiences like this highlight the accessibility issues that women face in society and how they mirror the accessibility issues within our legal system. This is just one more layer of problems that women have to navigate in addition to existing challenges.

As an additional component of my advocacy efforts, I devoted a significant amount of time to creating a comprehensive survey to gather information on the policies and practices of women's shelters and support housing organizations in the four Atlantic provinces. The survey covers a wide range of topics, including general policies, policies regarding pets and children, associated services and programs, and the application and admission process. It also addresses specific policies such as those related to confidentiality and privacy, curfew and facility access, substance use, and visitors. To ensure clarity and sensitivity, the survey includes a general disclaimer stating that the information will be presented as general guidance rather than strict rules and regulations.

This survey is a crucial step towards advocating for the needs of women seeking shelter and support services. I have already contacted over 20 different shelters to gather information, but this number does not represent the number of shelters I plan to reach out to during the Co-op. I am dedicated to finishing this project through the final weeks of the semester as I am highly engaged and recognize the importance of providing a valuable resource for women seeking information on supportive shelters through EFry.

In addition to my work as a research advocate, I also had the opportunity to work directly with clients at the Abundance Store and observe meetings between my supervisor, the legal manager of PATH Law firm and director of Efry NS, Emma Halpern, and clients of the organization who oversaw the Survivors for Change peer support group which is a support program for victims of sexualized violence. This experience allowed me to understand the importance of meeting clients on their own terms and supporting them in their recovery as they navigate their own lived experiences, both in interpersonal and legal contexts. It became clear that barriers can result not only from systemic issues but also from trauma that women

experience every day. Organizations like EFry play a critical role in supporting women and ensuring the proper implementation of the law. Without such support, women would be at a significant disadvantage within Canadian society.

As a final note, I encourage anyone considering a practicum placement with a non-governmental agency to consider the Elizabeth Fry Society. This experience will broaden your understanding of the everyday challenges faced by women in our society, extending beyond those seeking services from EFry. Although I cannot guarantee that it will make you appreciate your privilege, it will certainly prompt critical thinking. We should all strive to attain a higher level of understanding in our society, and working with EFry presents a unique opportunity to achieve this. I strongly encourage both male and female students, but especially male students, to consider this practicum placement, as the insights and appreciation gained through EFry employment cannot be replicated in a classroom. The experience offers unique learning opportunities for each person. For males, it provides the chance to gain a deeper understanding of the consequences of gender-based violence within our society and the impact on women who have been incarcerated. This topic is often under-discussed in our society, and it's important for all genders to be educated on it. For females, it's an opportunity to work in a truly empowering, female-based work setting, where they can achieve victories towards social justice issues that directly affect women. For anyone looking to pursue their practicum placement with the Elizabeth Fry Society, I highly recommend this amazing environment. Your critical thinking skills will be nurtured, and you'll have the opportunity to learn not only through the activities your supervisor assigns but also through witnessing the experiences of others, whether it's employees, clients, or members of the community who drop by the store to browse. The entire environment is uplifting, educational, and truly motivational, especially for those interested in

social justice issues. If you're looking for a placement that will maintain your passion for these issues and help you explore and understand the different roles and purposes of an NGO before pursuing your future career or studies, this is the perfect opportunity for you.