**Written Report: Student Experience with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia**

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POLI 4390: Practicum Placement in Public Policy: NGOs and Government Services

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March 31, 2023

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Women have been fighting and advocating for social, political, and economic change with respect to better prison conditions and fairer treatment within the legal system for centuries. Many women have paved the way and have spearheaded enormous change within institutions, and Elizabeth Fry is one of these incredible souls. During the Victorian era, Fry gained support from the Queen of England and other important societal figures about the importance of treating all people serving prison sentences with dignity and humanity. She was a catalyst for prison advocacy and is highly regarded for her efforts in the fight for change.

**Elizabeth Fry Society Of Mainland Nova Scotia: Background Information**

The organization I have had the absolute privilege of working with over the past four months of my student placement is the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia (EFMNS). The EFMNS is a non-profit charity that is devoted to changing, shaping, and assisting the lives of women, girls, non-binary, and gender diverse individuals who have had any sort of experience in or around the legal system (Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, 2023). The EFMNS mandate takes an alternative approach to traditional legal pathways by thinking outside the box of what is considered ‘restorative.’ It works to address gender discrimination across all levels of correction in Nova Scotia (EFMNS, 2023). The EFMNS mission statement aligns with this mandate by addressing discrimination and attempting to end the cycle of gender-based criminalization by providing an abundance of support, resources, and programs to individuals and communities (EFMNS, 2023). For example, EFMNS has transitional housing programs, life skills programming, and navigational aids to guide clients through court and other legal areas that one might encounter along their journey.

My supervisor, Nicole Wright, is one of the Intensive Case Managers for the EFMNS. I will speak about my fantastic experience with Nicole later, but I will now address the background of her ideas for my project. Currently, the EFMNS offers a wide selection of programming that address a variety of needs such as healing and resilience, emotional wellness, physical health, mental health barriers, peer support needs, BIPOC and Indigenous needs, educational and employment goals, and overall wellness through holistic and supported approaches (EFMNS, 2023). The focus of my project was based on ideas of holistic wellness. EFMNS clients’ life skills are a central factor in reintegration into the community. They are essential for many who have served time in an institutional setting where basic skills are either stripped away or forgotten over time. Life skills will be defined for this paper as the ability to adapt positive actions that help people deal successfully with life's difficulties and challenges. Nicole and I adapted this definition to explain to clients the focus of our project. Nicole proposed that we create and implement a survey addressing how criminalization impacts the life skills of EFMNS clients. The idea would be to use the survey data to design a life skills program and apply for grants to support these clients’ needs and future programming. Currently, in EFMNS history, there has never been a survey like the one I would be creating. As part of my discussions with Nicole about what the survey would look like and how it would work, I needed to research and understand life skills and the experience of being criminalized in order to create a survey that was client informed and centred.

**My Project: The Process and Implementation**

As I had never created or implemented a survey before, this project was a bit daunting at first, but I was energized by the amazing work that EFMNS does. I wanted to do as much as I could to contribute to helping their clients and creating positive change. Also, as I have never personally experienced being institutionalized or criminalized, I needed to educate myself and have research to back up any potential findings that might come from the analysis of the survey. Using my background in psychology to guide the approach, I started my project by researching the mental health effects that institutionalized settings have on inmates.  I also familiarized myself with learning terms and definitions and read EFMNS pamphlets and information packets to better understand the legal terms I would be encountering. This research helped further my understanding of life skills and how much they impact a client’s everyday life. I summarized this research in an analytical paper that Nicole and I reviewed to discuss the findings. I also started to practice using legal terms in my everyday language to reinforce my understanding, as most of these terms were new to me. Following this research, I learned how crucial it was to break down my own barriers before creating the survey. Words such as “criminalization,” for example, can carry a lot of weight depending on who you are speaking to. I realized that when you are creating a survey based on the legal system's impact on people who have experienced this firsthand, the wording is incredibly important. Later in this paper, I will describe how my experience meeting and helping Nicole’s clients has helped me grow personally and how this placement has profoundly impacted my future career goals. Once the background research was completed, I started the process of creating the survey itself. The survey came together in three parts: a first draft, a client trial, and an EFMNS staff review.

**The Survey**

First, as the focus of the survey was on the impacts of the justice system, the survey needed to be broken down into sections that addressed specific needs. It was decided in the first stage that it would be a printed survey, and either Nicole or I would be recording participant responses, with the other person there able to provide support or encouragement. We also wanted the survey to be client-centred, so adopting an interview style approach allowed us to focus directly on the client and enabled them to give whatever answer felt right to them. We wanted more open-ended questions rather than checked boxes so that it would spark conversation and allow the interviewee to feel more comfortable opening up and speaking to us. It was also identified early on that participant consent was vital as we would be asking about potentially triggering aspects of someone’s life.  Therefore, outlining expectations, important information, length of time, compensation, and what ongoing voluntary consent means was essential to maintain ethics and validity. Developing this informed consent page was vital as I understand how valuable participant experiences can be. We wanted all participants to know they had control in this situation. After four meetings, the first draft of the survey was completed, and we were ready to try it out and speak to clients about what they liked, disliked and what was missing from the survey.

In the second phase, I completed separate trial runs with two clients to test the survey questions and timing. This phase was where I gained precious information, as we received a lot of great feedback from both participants. I was able to connect with the importance of this survey because I heard firsthand how life experiences within the justice system had led these clients to experience discrimination, hardship and barriers that were continuing to be ignored due to lack of funding and misunderstanding of their needs. These clients were so open and honest with me during this trial run process that I could see which questions needed further explanation. This, in turn, led to a re-evaluation of how we asked specific questions and to a new outlook on the wording and the true intention behind why we were asking certain questions and their overall relevance. This trial process also informed which aspects of the survey would be more emotionally provoking than others. The last thing I wanted was for the survey to be overly clinical and analytical. This participant feedback was a turning point in understanding what it meant to be client centred. The trial also led to questioning if the survey was helpful at all. Because there were emotional sections for both trial participants, I didn’t want the survey to be retraumatizing, and I didn’t want to upset anyone. However, after Nicole and I discussed how the trial went, we agreed that it was important to include all sections. Asking the hard questions is valuable and was needed to get a truer understanding of all facets of life skills. This insight led to the addition of check-ins within the survey, which were intended to remind the interviewer to stop and take breaks and allow the participant to take a step back or pause when needed. Once these new additions were added, it was time to get EFMNS staff to review the project.

After the client trials, gathering feedback and different perspectives on the questions was critical. Nicole set up roughly seven meetings with different EFMNS managers to review the survey and pick apart sections that needed more attention. Every EFMNS staff brought incredible insight and offered valuable suggestions.  Once again, further emphasis was placed on the intention and wording of each section. Importance was also placed on using a positive psychology lens. For example, instead of asking “what are some barriers or challenges?”, questions were re-framed to ask, “what was helpful or impactful?”. Other recommendations from staff were not to use leading questions in order to avoid making assumptions about what a participant’s answer could be. With all these suggestions in mind, I created a definitions page for clients to look at while taking the survey. This page served as a guide if there was any jargon used that was not familiar to them. I also created a demographic section to address the assumptions that not everyone understands things the same way and that different populations have different needs. I also created a client version of the informed consent form to account for learning differences and the experiences of some clients not having the ability to read or write.

As we approached the beginning of March, it was time to get official approval for the survey so we could get funding and start administering the final version. The survey is approximately 40 pages long and has roughly 15 subsections on life skills. On March 14th, Emma Halpern, the Executive Director of EFMNS, approved the survey and consent forms. It was decided that we could offer a $25 compensation for participants taking the survey. The EFMNS staff reviews were very inspiring.  It opened my eyes to the knowledge and understanding that staff members have, and I came to appreciate that these traits are incredibly important when it comes to working with EFMNS’s demographic of clients.

**Firsthand Experience: Client Interactions & Impacts**

As a psychology major, I came in with a certain lens of what criminalization and incarceration does to mental health. I had biases and ideas about criminalized individuals and the socioeconomic factors or social determinants of health that lead to experiences within the criminal justice system. My studies and personal experiences have taught me that unfortunately racism, sexism, and discrimination frequently occur within the legal system. Still, until my placement, I had no personal experience to back up my learning thus far. Before my experience, I was centring the system by focusing on what the system does for people and did not understand that the system is where the majority of the problems lie. However, after my entire experience with EFMNS, I have a new perspective on the criminal justice system. I have been exposed to how the justice system is the central pressure that can lead to increased mental health crises due to systemic racism, discrimination, and enormous barriers that cause a lifetime of hardship for someone trying to live and survive. After supporting a client at court, I saw firsthand how the criminal justice system ignores harm reduction and rarely defers individuals to restorative justice processes as a way of sentencing even when incredibly applicable.

Throughout my entire experience at EFMNS, my biggest takeaway and the moments I have learned from the most are those I got to spend with some of Nicole’s clients. Nicole and I would frequently visit and spend time supporting or running errands with clients. It was through day-to-day conversations that I got to know these individuals and learned so much about what it means to be selfless and genuinely authentic. However, there was also a level of sadness that came with getting to know clients. Due to many circumstances, most of Nicole’s clients have experienced gruelling traumas and are living with various mental health difficulties. Often, these clients also live in harsh conditions, have little to no access to basic life needs such as food or housing, and have little resources or support other than EFMNS. I am outraged and extremely upset at seeing and hearing about these adverse and traumatic life experiences and horrible living conditions. Not only are these clients fighting every day to be heard and respected, but they are also fighting against current systems that should be in place to help and not harm. Everyone should be treated with kindness and respect regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, or previous experiences. It became clear to me it is not the client’s fault and that conditions such as sociopolitical, socioeconomic, psychosocial, and multigenerational effects create a multitude of barriers that do not make it easy to trust or ask for help in the first place. Experiencing the justice system in any way can be highly upsetting and triggering, and these feelings are not commonly acknowledged or supported in client-centred ways.

In speaking with clients about the survey, many expressed that they carried a lot of shame regarding their abilities to participate and maintain life skills. Within these statements of shame, we can see how many systems interact that do not always center the client or provide comfort and reassurance that it is not the client’s fault. I think the survey has been incredibly beneficial to these clients as I have been using it to explain that criminalization and mental health are major proponents that directly affect life skills and that they are not alone in their feelings or need for increased support services.

Through all these client experiences, I have been impacted profoundly as I think every day about the individuals I have met and how their words have changed how I go about my daily routines of life. For example, I am starting to create professional relationships with these clients, and I feel good about the support I can provide. There is an incredible feeling of satisfaction and pride when you see a client land a job interview, find housing, and even have a joyous day. This work allows you to acknowledge every win and celebrate the positive impact of lending a helping hand. I am so inspired by the work EFMNS does that I have decided this is the demographic of Social Work that I want to pursue in the future.

**Recommendations for Future Students**

Over my first few days at EFMNS, Nicole toured me around the office and took me to visit Holly House, which is a federal transition house, and Pinecrest, which is subsidized housing for Indigenous women. I also toured the Abundance Store and met many other staff and a few clients along the way. I was able to volunteer for an afternoon at Holly House Foodbank and sat it on client in-takes, phone calls and meetings. If EFMNS is something you are interested in, I would 100% recommend working with Nicole or any other intensive case manager. Nicole has been incredibly supportive every step of the way. She has let me jump in with both feet and be as active as possible throughout the whole process. One suggestion for future students is that they need to have the capacity to handle someone else’s trauma, as you never know when/what a client will disclose. Prospective students must also have the skills to be calm in uncomfortable settings. You can expect to be working with clients firsthand, and you need to have personable skills to be open to working with any individual, regardless of their circumstances.

Another point for future students to consider is that the EFMNS office is in Dartmouth.  Because travelling to the office is expected and is where most of the meetings take place, having access to transportation is beneficial. Overall, EFMNS is an incredible organization, and I highly recommend it.  My overall experience was incredible, and I have learned so much about the field and myself. I have learned resilience and have been touched by the lives of all EFMNS clients. I got to be in the field, work one-on-one with clients, and feel like I was contributing to real change. I would 100% recommend FRMNS to any volunteers or students, as the environment is encouraging and welcoming. You get to work with individuals who genuinely care about their clients and want to make a real impact. They have been nothing but supportive and an inspiration to me, and I will miss them all very much. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone, especially my supervisor Nicole, and I hope you consider EFMNS for your placement.

**References**

Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia. (2023, March 26). *About Us.* https://www.efrymns.ca/