Political Science Practicum Report

YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs

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**The YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs**

First of all, I’d like to describe the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs and provide a brief description of the work they do. The centre runs a multitude of programs for newcomers, immigrants, and refugees of all ages to help them settle in Canada. These programs range from language services, to employment support, to youth study programs. Staff at the centre help newcomers integrate into Canadian society by offering these various services to ensure a smooth settlement. One of the programs at the centre that is currently being developed is the national Gender-Based Violence Settlement Sector Strategy Project. This project has been developed by the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs, as well as three other Canadian organizations. The other organizations include The Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance (CISSA), the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA CAN), and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI). The project receives funding from Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), which initially provided funding from 2019-2022, and due to the success of the project, has been extended to 2026. The project is managed by Kathryn Bates-Khan, which is really neat because Kathryn was my supervisor. This meant that I got to learn directly under the woman who managed the entire multi-organization, national project. The project’s overarching goal is to better address gender-based violence in newcomer, immigrant, and refugee communities. In collaboration between these four organizations, some of the work the project has done includes: research on the supports available to gender-based violence victims, a comprehensive strategy to combat GBV, webinars with settlement and anti-violence workers, and an online course. These various “project activities” strive to bridge the knowledge gap between settlement workers and anti-violence workers so that support for survivors of GBV is the best and most comprehensive it can be.

**My Work**

My work at the YMCA was mostly focused on this Gender-Based Violence Settlement Sector Strategy Project, which I’ll refer to as the GBV Project. In my initial weeks, I completed an online course that the project created called Bridges to Safety: Building the Capacity of the Settlement Sector to Respond to Gender-Based Violence, together with the Anti-Violence Sector. I’ll refer to this course as Bridges to Safety, or B2S. The Bridges to Safety course is designed to be taken by service providers in the settlement and anti-violence sectors but could be taken by anyone to learn more about GBV in at-risk communities, such as newcomer, immigrant, and refugee communities. For example, professionals like psychologists or counsellors, or even schoolteachers who teach ESL, could benefit from this informative course. The course is comprised of five modules with different lessons ranging from “Safety Planning” and “Risk Factors for Lethal Violence” to “Being an Ally” and “Practicing Self-Care”. It took me three weeks to complete this course as I was taking detailed notes on each module as I worked my way through it. I was copyediting each module, so I was noting things like missing commas, missing hyphens, redundant words, missing words, grammatical issues, etcetera. I was also taking notes on broken links that were embedded in the course and aesthetical issues like mismatched fonts. After I completed the course, I had a meeting with Amanda Dominey (Resource Editor), Sana Ben Ayad (Operations and Outreach), and Kathryn, to go over the course edits. Amanda did this practicum course when she was studying at Dalhousie and now works at the YMCA! Amanda sent me her course edits after the meeting, and I added all edits that I found in addition to hers. Amanda then sent our suggested edits to the company that designed the website.

         The next four weeks I spent working on an evaluation plan that a research and evaluation company created to assess the success of the GBV project. I don’t think I can name the company due to confidentiality reasons, but they are a Canadian-based market research, polling, and evaluation services company. This company is a corporate member of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC), which is to say that they conduct research-based evaluations and are a great resource for the YMCA, and more specifically, this GBV project. As part of their evaluation, they created a Service Provider Survey, which hasn’t been released yet, but aims to measure the success of the GBV project in engaging service providers in the settlement and anti-violence sectors. The survey asks various questions to garner qualitative reviews, as well as generate quantitative reviews, on the multiple “project activities”, including workshops and the online B2S course. For example, a quantitative result would be something like: “x percentage of respondents reported that their engagement with the project increased their knowledge on how to address GBV.” I reviewed this Service Provider Survey as well as the evaluation plan. I then created a document with my suggested edits to the survey. I reviewed the evaluation plan while drafting my edits to ensure I left the key indicator questions in my revised survey – key indicator meaning the questions that tap into the most salient impacts the evaluation is aiming to measure. I recommended edits on capitalization issues, confusing questions/re-wording, and potential additional questions to ask. I then hosted a meeting with Kathryn, Sana, and Briana (Champion Network Coordinator), to go through my suggested edits and review the Service Provider Survey. As we discussed additional edits, I took notes, and then I combined all suggested edits into one document which I then sent to Sana to review before sending to the research and evaluation company. Kathryn then sent me suggested edits on the same Service Provider Survey by Salina Abji, one of the research consultants. I reviewed Salina’s suggestions and compared them to ours. I then summarized her edits into 14 concise suggestions and prepared a meeting with Kathryn, Briana, and Sana to go over Salina’s edits and finalize how we wanted the survey to look. In the meeting, I gave a summary of Salina’s suggestions, then went through comparing and contrasting her suggestions to ours based on the notes I took. After the meeting, I drafted a revised survey with all of those edits (including Salina’s and ours) and sent that to the YMCA team (Kathryn, Sana, and Briana) to look over and send back to the research and evaluation company. The representative from the company working with the YMCA on the GBV project reviewed our suggested edits and then sent back her feedback. I was then tasked with reviewing her commentary and compiling an overview of her feedback. I created a document highlighting the final changes that the representative made and noted any areas where she didn’t incorporate our suggested edits.

         The remainder of my co-op was spent reviewing PowerPoint slideshows for the Newcomer Youth Employment Toolkit workshops. These workshops aim to help young newcomers become acclimated to Canadian work culture by learning about work customs like the application process, how to create a resume, deal with references, interview preparation, finding employment, etcetera. I went through the slideshows and took note of any errors in the speaker notes as well as discrepancies between the slide and the speaker notes.

**Overview**

         My practicum was entirely virtual, which was something I actually appreciated since the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programs is located in Bayers Lake, a decent commute from where I live. Although it was virtual, I was still able to attend numerous meetings, and even hosted two. I worked on three overall tasks and Kathryn and I had a good set-up where I’d email her each week to touch base and ask about what I should turn my focus to next. This worked well for me, but it may not be ideal for someone who doesn’t like to take initiative or who would prefer to work on one large project instead of multiple smaller tasks. Kathryn was accommodating and flexible – she asked me in the first couple of weeks what my interests, skills, and goals were, and tried to match my preferences to the work she needed to be done. Since I am interested in writing and want to pursue a career in journalism, Kathryn delegated mostly copyediting and writing tasks to me. She mentioned that most practicum students want to be involved in programming or direct volunteering with newcomer youth and families, so that could potentially be an option for a future student placed at the YMCA. I think that if a student wanted to be in person they readily could be, but should keep in mind that there is a rigorous process to be able to volunteer at the centre. They require that volunteers obtain a criminal background check and vulnerable sector check, provide references, and a Child Abuse Registry check. The volunteer coordinator position was shifting from one person to a new employee, so volunteering in-person wasn’t really an option for me, but likely would be in the future. I would suggest this placement to anyone who is interested in settlement and immigration or interested in combating the issues that face these communities. There are so many different areas that one could focus on at the YMCA, so you can really cater your work to fit your interests, so long as your supervisor approves. For example, you could help out in person with programming like employment workshops or you could do more managerial tasks like work on editing the documents that go into this programming. If you’re someone who is interested in coding, you could help with their online courses, or help with website design.

**Biggest Takeaways**

First and foremost, I learned a great deal about gender-based violence, particularly GBV in newcomer, immigrant, and refugee communities. A misconception that I had before this practicum was that GBV rates may be higher in these communities, but I learnt while taking the B2S course that these communities don’t in fact report higher rates than the general population in Canada. They do however face unique barriers and risk factors that make them vulnerable to violence and less likely to seek support. I learnt about the various resources, including government resources, that exist for safety planning. There are even apps to help people safely plan escape routes and plans for leaving their intimate partner. Many of these resources provide checklists and tips for people planning to use abusive relationships. Some of these tips include using library laptops to access these resources so their partner can’t track their search history, setting up a separate bank account and saving up some money before leaving, packing a small bag of important possessions before their departure, informing a friend or family member of their plan, having code words for discussing their situation with their settlement or anti-violence worker while on the phone, and many more. This is practical knowledge for anyone to have. I also learnt about what a client-centred approach entails – meaning that service providers or whoever is working with someone experiencing GBV let the survivor come to their own conclusions and make their own decisions. Sometimes people in these situations choose to stay, and that is completely their own, valid decision (as long as they are not at risk for lethal violence). More than just this practical and important knowledge, I also learnt valuable and applicable skills and competencies like designing evaluations, online course design, knowledge translation, copyediting, communication, and writing. These skills apply to any future career that I will possess and I’m thankful to have spent my practicum under the supervision of Kathryn at the YMCA!