Practicum Placement: MLA Angela Simmonds Office

POLI 4390

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My practicum placement was in the office of Angela Simmonds. Angela is a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the electoral district of Preston in Nova Scotia. She was elected in the 2021 provincial election as a member of the Nova Scotia Liberal Party. Angela has held the role of Deputy Speaker and has introduced many bills including the Act to Dismantle Racism and Hate. Prior to getting elected and pursuing a career in politics, Angela was a lawyer and was active in addressing the legacy of systemic racism in historic African Nova Scotian communities. I was one of the two students stationed there, and throughout our time at the office we were able to talk to Angela quite frequently. However, our supervisor and our direct contact was her constituency manager Fawn Logan-Young. As the MLA, Angela was responsible for representing the Preston area. Her office’s aim was to provide support for her constituency members and provide different resources to fulfil their needs as best as possible. This includes directing folks in the right direction for issues such as provincial grants like heating rebates. Throughout this report I will talk about my time working in her office. I will highlight the work I did, what I learned, what went well or did not go well, and whether I recommend it to future students or not.

This placement was a late addition to the course, as both the other student placed in Angela’s office, and I were not previously registered for this course. As a result, for my first meeting with both Angela and Fawn, I did not have any expectations on what the work entailed. Later, I found out that this was an important skill to have while working in the office due to the ever-changing nature our tasks. Our initial meeting was held in the conference room, which would also be the room we would be stationed in when we came in throughout the semester. In this first meeting we talked about the work we would be doing for our time there. Angela and Fawn had two projects that they outlined and that we could choose from. The aim of the first project was to highlight the African Nova Scotian heritage throughout the Preston area by getting signage for the area. This project would have permitted us to work with all three levels of government: municipal, provincial, and federal. For this project we would have to go around the community and consult with residents about the signage. Whereas the other project was described as a more hands-on one where we would work closely within the community highlighting Black run businesses throughout the Preston area. For this project we would have held community coffee-chats to help residents with any resources they would need such as providing help filling out provincial grants.

Our first day in the office once the semester started, we were asked to help with the Winter Wear Drive. A project taken on by Angela’s office, Trish Purdy’s municipal office and Square Roots. We took over a lot of the tasks for this project and for this first week our tasks consisted of sorting through the donations we had received and organizing it by size and matching inventory to families' orders. We kept track of it all through spreadsheets and the order forms people had filled out. For the next two weeks, we kept working on the Winter Wear Drive. There were some issues with the inventory because some of it was organized by Trish Purdy’s office and they had classified the inventory a lot differently that our office as well as given some of the inventory away without our knowledge which caused some confusion. So, our tasks for this week included going through the donations again and organizing them by size, fulfilling families’ orders again to ensure that everyone was getting as many items as they had requested, given the donations we had and ensuring that we were being fair to everyone. We also had to delegate some tasks to the volunteers who were helping with the pickups and call the people who requested the items to confirm that they still wanted their orders and figure out what was the best time for them to come in and pick up their orders. This project took longer than we all had initially thought as many of the applicants did not come to pick up their orders at the allocated time. So, we had to make multiple rounds of calls, and in the end we were able to organize delivery times. Overall, this project was quite rewarding as we were able to overcome quite a few obstacles along the way and we had the chance to see the positive impact this project had on individuals who came to pick their orders in the office while we were there. It was amazing being able to see this project come to life after all the time and effort we put into it and seeing everyone’s happiness and excitement when they looked at their winter wear. Seeing the looks on the faces of parents when they picked winter clothes up for themselves and for their children was very rewarding and worth all the work we had to do in those weeks.

For these three weeks that we worked on the Winter Wear Drive, some of our hours were spent working for this project in the office, while our remaining hours we had homework which we could do at home. One week we had to create posters for a Free Skate event that was happening next month. This event was organized for individuals to go and meet with their MLA’s, and there was free chocolate and free skating. Another week we had to draft letters to the Minster of Health on a topic that a constituency member had issues with. One of my topics was MPox where I had to talk about the continued use of the term “Monkeypox” in public health communications. This is a problematic term because it is stigmatizing and discriminatory, therefore, the term MPox should be used instead when referring to the disease. Additionally, I talked about the issue of restricted access in getting the MPox vaccine within the Central Zone in Nova Scotia. Another letter I had to draft was about the announcement the province released about providing $3.5 million to support community-based housing opportunities in African Nova Scotian communities. In this letter I raised some issues that many constituent members have brought up such as issues of land ownership and whether this transfer of homes and projects will impact residents who have been trying to get their houses back in their name.

These were all the tasks that we did in January, but before we move into what the month of February looked like for us, I wanted to talk about something important that happened our second week into the placement. Our second week into the placement, we had just come in for the day when Fawn told us Angela’s decision to resign from her position as MLA. While this did not impact our placement or the ability of complete this course as Angela's last day would be April 1st, the nature of our work at the office has changed. The long-term projects we were planning on working on for the rest of the semester had shifted, as they do not have much need for long-term projects. Now we are working on more of a communications/community engagement role. In the time that was left, we were given odd jobs, to help wrap-up projects in time before Angel’s last day.

Throughout February, our tasks included going into local businesses and organizations, interviewing the owners and drafting 'spotlights' of them for social media. For Black History Month we highlighted Black-owned businesses around the Preston constituency to highlight on Angela’s Instagram. We were responsible for reaching out to businesses, interviewing them, and making the visuals for the post. I loved doing this because I got to directly connect with community members and learn more about their business. What inspired them, the impact they wanted to have on their communities, and their connection to Preston.

For the first two weeks of March Fawn went on vacation, so she let us take over her position for that time. Before she left, Fawn made sure to tell us everything we would need to make this time as stress-free as possible. This included instructions to log into the computer and the constituency email, access the voicemail on the office phone and how to document all the voicemails. We also had a page with instructions on what to say/where to guide people if they stopped by the office or called the office and they needed resources such as who to contact for their specific issue or how to access the heating assistance grant. We were also given a book titled *Positive Aging Guide,* which had a list of all the different provincial services someone would need. On top of all this support Fawn gave us, we were given the contact information of a part-time employee within the office who we could contact for any questions or if we had any issues. During these two weeks that we were filling Fawn’s role, Angela was also in and out of the office. This is a scary experience in the beginning because it felt very intimidating, however as we started going through all the emails, listening to all the voicemails, and returning calls it was less and less scary. It made me realize how much people rely on their MLA’s for support and information that they needed. I have never engaged with my MLA before, but this showed me that they are there to support us. Other things we did were leaving notes for Angela on any invitations she would receive and other important information she needed to know. These two weeks other than going into the office, we also had to create an Instagram post for some Lake Echo events that were happening throughout the month as well as provide a summary of all the different departments of the Black Initiatives website. These two weeks were a little nerve wracking in the beginning, but after a while we got the hang of it. Fawn gave us all the information we needed and prepared us well. I really appreciated this because it made me feel like we knew where to turn and what to do if there were any surprises. This was also a really amazing opportunity, as someone who is interested in politics I was able to experience first-hand what a job in this field looks like, felts like, what it entails. Plus, it showed that both Fawn and Angela showed that they trusted us, and it felt good to be part of the office and part of the team.

This brings us to our final week. For this week, Fawn wanted us to plan a going away coffee chat for Angela. We were to make the posters to advertise the event, get the decorations and snacks and make a going away card for Angela. We were not given a lot of time to organize this, so in the beginning it seemed a little intimidating. However, we both love planning and organizing events like this, and since Fawn gave us full creative control, we were able to have fun with it.

Overall, I enjoyed this placement, and I am very grateful to both Fawn and Angela for this opportunity. They both showed that they trusted us, they made sure to include us and make us feel part of the team. This was amazing to experience and helped us connect with both Fawn and Angela. While things did not always go as planned and plans would change many times, it was a good lesson that in politics things are always changing. I would definitely recommend this placement to any student who is interested in the future. However, since Angela steeped down, this position and working with both Angela and Fawn is no longer an option, working in the office of an MLA is valuable. Fawn was always very accommodating of our schedules, and while this was mainly an in-person position, there were times where we could work from home as well. In the beginning, something that I had a little trouble with was the ever-changing plan for the tasks we were given. However, this was a good lesson for me, as it is important to recognize that in a political setting things are always changing. I would say that being adaptable, flexible, and able to work in an independent setting are characteristics that are valuable for a placement like this. I found that while the work was tedious at time, it was also very rewarding. This was a unique experience that I always remember that I am so thankful so the relationship this placement allowed me to cultivate with both Fawn and Angela. I was able to get an inside look on the way that politics works, how the day-to-day things are run. I hope that future positions in a constituency office are as fantastic as this experience was for me.