

Victoria Gibbs

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POLI4390- NGOs and Government

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### Reflection/Overview of my Experience

My practicum placement this term was under the supervision of Lisa Terryl at Terryl and Scott's Lawyers Inc., located along the Bedford Highway in Halifax. My practicum was primarily related to the prison justice clinic or 'bullpen' organized by Lisa and other Halifax-based Lawyers. Overall, I am grateful for this experience and learned a lot. That being said, after hearing about the structure of other practicums, my peers did this year, I feel it is one of the more disorganized placements. Part of that is due to the nature of the placement itself, another part is due to a certain lack of guidance that I believe comes from the fact you are one of a few, if any, active volunteers that are not law students or a paralegal. For the purposes of my report, I've opted to organize my experience into the different elements that influenced my experience; the lawyers; location; prison clinic 'bullpen'; clients; schedule; and personal reflections. Personal reflections are littered throughout the various sections, so the final reflection is more of a holistic overview and discussion of whether I would recommend this placement to future students. I hope this organization can help future students who may be nervous about a particular aspect of the placement easily access the information they are looking for.

## **Lawyers (Supervisor)**

Lisa Terryl is the direct supervisor for this placement. Despite her work with prison justice her specialty is not prison justice but family and employment law. With the clinic, I also had an opportunity to meet and interact with several other lawyers. One is Daniel Wilband, and another is Asaf Rashid, specializing in criminal law and prison advocacy.

My interaction with lawyers who weren't Lisa was mostly confined to the prison clinic, which I will discuss more thoroughly in the following sections. However, I did enjoy hearing from other lawyers and witnessing the contrast in how they discuss legal matters depending on their backgrounds and the information they have. When I spoke with Lisa about clients, she was very familiar with their cases and could discuss matters in detail and give specific advice. On the other hand, attending the prison clinic with other lawyers present meant they did not necessarily have that same background. They navigated advice with much more caution and generalizations. Lisa's advice was more pertinent for my clients but from a personal perspective. It was interesting to witness the contrast.

Another person I interacted with was Shannon, a paralegal, and the easiest way to describe her job, as I witnessed it, was as Lisa's right-hand woman. Shannon was always very kind, and I've had nearly as much contact with her as with Lisa. She was the person I went through for scheduling meetings with Lisa and clients or Lisa and myself. She was also the most accessible point of contact for any quick, logistical questions. There was even one occasion when I was with a client, and we could not access the prison clinic. Shannon stayed on the phone with a client and me for about twenty minutes, trying to help answer questions we had about a contract.

I think I had as much contact with Shannon as I did because Lisa went on vacation for three weeks in the middle of my placement. She was still working while away, and I did have some contact with her during this time. However, Shannon was still working and was far more accessible and the only one actually in the city at the time. By the end of those three weeks, I had started to feel like Shannon was my point person, and when I had an issue, my instinct became to want to contact Shannon.

### **Location**

The placement is done in a hybrid format. While there are opportunities to meet directly with Lisa and potentially even clients at Terry and Scott's Lawyers Inc. on Bedford Highway. I found this aspect of the placement very beneficial, and I certainly learnt the most when I was able to be in person with Lisa. I've witnessed firsthand how dynamic and jam-packed a lawyer's schedule can be, which, unfortunately, can make navigating any complex questions and concerns during the placement difficult. Being in person is ideal because it is the only opportunity to be walked through any confusing processes step by step.

That being said, a lot of my work was remote. I spent the most time on phone calls, compared to in-person or video meetings. I didn't mind this too much as it worked well with my schedule to have that flexibility, but it did lack consistency. I think this would have been frustrating had I been taking a full five courses or had I not already developed a level of flexibility with my learning and work locations during the pandemic. Frankly, my thesis, job, and work with the student union I was doing this semester also required a level of flexibility that I think made it easier to adjust to the nature of this placement.

On one occasion, I did opt to meet with a client in person at Jamieson Centre, located in Dartmouth. I opted to go alone for a meeting in March to accommodate the accessibility needs of this client, and it, unfortunately, led to an uncomfortable situation that I was not fully prepared for. I think it would be beneficial to build into this course a recommendation that students do not meet one-on-one with individuals who are not their supervisors, at least in unfamiliar locations. I highly recommend that future students only do this if their supervisor is with them.

### **Prison Clinic 'Bullpen'**

The prison clinic assists incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals with human rights claims. In my time with the clinic, I encountered cases where incarcerated individuals had been subject to human rights violations in the form of abuse, negligence, or both.

The prison clinic is held for an hour and a half during the first three Thursdays of the month. Twice in the morning and once during the evening. It functions as an opportunity for volunteers or clients to call in and get answers to their legal questions or seek general advice from lawyers on the next steps related to whatever they are working on. It is free of cost legal coaching for the clients and an educational opportunity for volunteers, most of whom are either law students or paralegals.

I understand the clinic was previously held in a hybrid format, where incarcerated clients could call in, but volunteers and lawyers would mostly come together in person. However, I only experienced the 'bullpen' in a virtual format. It functions well when only volunteers are present;

however, when clients are calling in who can't mute or see what is going on, I have found it can get a little loud and chaotic.

While most of the work I completed in my placement was related to the prison clinic, I did not spend much time there. First, you may not always have relevant work to bring to the clinic, and the time may not always work. I was fortunate that my class and work schedules were empty on Thursdays this year, but that was a coincidence, considering my classes were scheduled before my knowledge of the prison clinic. Luckily, I also have a flexible work schedule and set my hours which contributed to my ability to do this placement.

At the moment, Thursday is the only day the prison clinic meets. It is also the only day Lisa does work with the prison clinic. Her other days are reserved for her other work. As my direct supervisor for the placement, I needed to be able to accommodate my Thursdays to focus on this placement. That being said, while this schedule would obviously change in the future, success in this placement currently hinges on being available Thursdays. In theory, someone could make it work if they only had a short morning class, for example, but I would not recommend it. I do not think it is possible to have a successful experience in this placement without an open and flexible Thursday.

## **Clients**

The clients for this placement are all formerly or currently incarcerated individuals. I found working with this demographic to be very eye-opening. I have family members who have gone through the system, but their experiences aren't something we commonly discuss. I was never directly involved or aware of their ongoing experiences due to my age. Working directly

with people still navigating Canada's justice system and helping them with that revealed a level of injustice that I have heard about but had not fully recognized takes place in Atlantic Canada until this semester.

I had the opportunity to speak and work with three clients during my placement. In my experience, they are all very kind and understanding that you are a student and may not have all the experience necessary to assist with all their concerns. As someone who has worked with many different demographics; elderly, children, government employees, teenagers, university students, and now lawyers, I found my clients to be the most patient people I have ever worked with. The justice system works slowly, and I think their patience is learnt from this. As an impatient person, I struggled with the lack of results I witnessed during my placement, and I feel like I could learn from these clients in ways I did not anticipate.

The most disheartening experience I had during my placement was when I had to inform my first client we would not be able to take on their case. I had been going back and forth with him for a few weeks, but when it came time to sign the legal services agreement and the timeline of his human rights claim became clearer, it was no longer possible for him to continue as a client. He was understanding, but I found it difficult to explain to someone why we would not be able to help them with their case, especially considering he did face human rights violations and the preventative features were time (statute of limitations) and money. While I was not glad to have this experience, I think it was a humbling life experience that goes beyond the parameters of this practicum. Not everything is equitable or just, especially for people in vulnerable positions, and someone has to be the bearer of bad news when the world isn't a fair place. Unfortunately, it was me in this case. This experience taught me a valuable lesson about

separating myself from my work, though you should not take away the guilt from experiences beyond your control.

## **Schedule**

I spoke a bit in the *Prison Clinic 'Bullpen'* section about how at least this year, if I was not available Thursdays specifically, this placement could not work. I want to reiterate that that day could change in future years, but with the current set-up for this placement, it seems guaranteed there will be one day a week that is imperative to student participation in this placement, and that day is not the student's choice. The prison clinic was always on Thursdays, and Lisa was usually only available for Thursday meetings. However, there was a lot of work that could be done outside of Thursdays as well.

Legal administrative phone calls were one feature of the prison system I had to navigate. In the facilities, specific days could be assigned to your client's block for these calls, and the schedule for them is limited and fills up quickly. It is a guarantee you will have to schedule these phone calls outside of Thursday, at least at some point. What became exponentially more tricky was trying to schedule one of these calls at a time that worked for both Lisa, a client, and myself. These calls had to be on Thursdays because of Lisa's schedule, and I was fortunate to have a flexible Thursday because if my schedule also needed to be accommodated, I think there is no way these calls would have ever worked.

Another option for contacting clients is to add your number to their call list, which would allow them to call you on the Bell Phones, available for public use amongst the inmates, for thirty minutes at a time, during the day. There are some constraints on when inmates can call

you, but I found this much easier than dealing with legal phone calls. Clients may prefer legal phone calls for privacy reasons, but I luckily had clients that did not have a preference. The potential downside is that clients can call you anytime they can access the phones. They were generally respectful of my schedule, but because it was a mix of flexible and fixed this year, I didn't always know when I would or wouldn't be available. Sometimes clients also have something come up out of the blue, so they call to set up a meeting, ask a question, etc. I got phone calls more than once during class or at an appointment and almost always took them. It isn't easy to call clients back, and sometimes I had information to give them too, so when they called, it felt necessary to take that opportunity.

Have you ever seen a depiction of a lawyer always on the phone in media or pop culture? I think I understand a little bit of why after this placement. I also experienced it with Lisa, she often would have to answer other calls during meetings; that being said, she would usually also answer my phone calls even when she was preoccupied. Unfortunately, this is another instance where you may receive unexpected phone calls because Lisa needs to go over something with you, wants to introduce you to your new client for the first time, etc. So, on top of clients, I also occasionally received unexpected phone calls from Lisa. Although usually, they were scheduled.

The only other scheduling aspect is that meetings will change without your knowledge. I can't count the number of times a meeting was changed from 11:30 to 12:30 and then changed again within a week before it happened. It was not ideal, but I quickly understood it to be part of the nature of this work. That being said, it is a huge part of why I would not recommend this placement if you don't have a free or very flexible Thursday.



## **Personal Experience**

Overall, I do not regret this experience. As someone who has considered law school and is graduating with a gap year, I think it gave me extremely relevant insight into the day-to-day of a lawyer and for that, I am grateful. That being said, I have often managed a chaotic schedule, and I was not taking a traditional classroom course load this year. I had two classroom-based classes, this practicum, and a thesis. My jobs outside of school either allowed me or required a flexible schedule. Without these factors, I would not have been able to accommodate this specific practicum placement otherwise.

When I started my placement, I could not get a straight answer about how my hours would be disseminated throughout the week or semester or what the in-person to virtual-ratio would look like. Now I understand why and hope I have clarified those reasons in my reflection/overview.

I think there is still a benefit to this placement, but I would not suggest taking this placement for someone whose only motivation is to do a practicum. First, if someone happens to be taking this class as an underclassman not yet in their twenties or without much previous work experience, I think this could be an overwhelming placement. Second, while I did have a beneficial experience as a political science/international development major, I think this placement is best suited for LJSO students who may have better foundational knowledge than I did coming in.