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Working from the Outside with Those on the Inside: My Time with East Coast Prison Justice Society

Introduction

Over the past three months I have had the privilege of completing my practicum placement with the local non-profit, East Coast Prison Justice Society (ECPJS). I have gained new technical experience from my placement, as well as an insight to the often-hidden part of society... prison. ECPJS is a non-profit organization that partakes in prison justice advocacy initiatives and provides justice resources for individuals incarcerated in institutions around Nova Scotia. Their mission as an organization is to advocate for and inform inmates on their rights within prison as they are often left feeling invisible or voiceless to society. Currently some of their projects include the Visiting Committee Project, pro bono support for prison law cases, advocacy efforts regarding access to legal aid, and advocacy for reforms within the Nova Scotia criminal justice system.

East Coast Prison Justice Society Projects

The ECPJS Visiting Committee Project places its efforts in assuring the transparency of provincial corrections institutions by conducting interviews and visits with prisoners to discuss any concerns they may have about institutional issues or procedures. With the information gathered, ECPJS provides reports to the institutions as well as legal advocacy boards around Nova Scotia to create a sense of accountability for inmate rights and needs to be met. The pro bono work that ECPJS engages in, partners with Dalhousie Schulich School of Law students to

assist in legal research in support of prison justice within the province. Many of the inmates that bring their issues to the Visiting Committee have cases brought forward to the pro bono division to help them with legal information going forward. Most of the advocacy efforts of ECPJS involve writing reports and letters of action to Nova Scotia bodies expressing concerns from inmate reports and recommended courses for action. One of ECPJS's well known advocacy efforts around Nova Scotia is their coverage on the criminalization of addiction through the use of 'drunk tanks' and the implementation of less stigmatizing and more effective sobering centres instead. This advocacy campaign gained major traction in provincial media and shows the power that ECPJS has in bringing awareness to systemic justice system issues.

Realities of Working in the Non-Profit Space

I worked alongside my advisor and the current lead of the Visiting Committee Project, Laura Beach throughout the duration of my placement. Laura has spearheaded the Visiting Committee Project as it has gone virtual since Covid-19 made in person visits to prison unavailable. They also oversee many of the Dalhousie Schulich School of Law students and their pro bono work. Laura is currently completing their PhD, is a course instructor at Mount St. Vincent University, and dedicated staff member of ECPJS. Working alongside Laura demonstrated the passion and dedication that it takes to do advocacy work, but also introduced the realities of compassion fatigue. They explained the rewarding nature of the job as allowing inmates to have their stories and situations heard is sometimes all they need that day. When shadowing Laura on the phone line, the active listening that they were able to provide each caller showed immense compassion for the issues each inmate was expressing. I was able to witness Laura's longstanding relationships with frequent callers as they would always ask follow-up questions from their previous conversations as well as any issues that the inmate expressed from

the previous week. Having this contact and the creation of a file for each inmate with all their concerns and conditions, allows them to feel heard and supported throughout their time incarcerated. Laura would always mention the importance of being patient within legal advocacy work. Sometimes they felt as though change would never come from their work, and sometimes there is enough information gathered to write a report or build a case that will go on to address important systemic injustices. The reward is not instant, but the longstanding change that comes from appeals and press- releases on the matters going on within provincial institutions is creating a positive difference for inmates.

With this, Laura was very transparent throughout our weekly debriefs and meetings that the job becomes taxing overtime as many of the issues that inmates call in to discuss are disregarded or excused through loopholes in legislation. They explained that they felt overwhelming compassion fatigue at times. Compassion fatigue is defined as a form of stress that results from repeated exposure to the life of a traumatized individual. An individual who is often in a role of a support system, caretaker, or trauma support worker are exposed to stories and situations of trauma on a consistent basis. Over time, hearing these traumatic stories and situations causes a depleted ability to cope with their everyday environment. Compassion fatigue sometimes leads to feelings of excessive guilt and sadness as the support worker begins to feel so empathetic towards what they are hearing they begin to internalize it into the context of their own lives. Laura mentioned how some days this position is hard to ‘walk away’ from at the end of the day as the situations of inmates that they listened too throughout their shift are still occurring even once the phone line closes.

Beginning of Practicum: Project One

I began to understand what Laura meant when they referenced the contrast of fulfillment and compassion fatigue that comes along with the job as I got fully onboarded to a Visiting Committee volunteer throughout my placement. The practicum placement was split up over two days during my week where Tuesdays would include a weekly debrief and meeting about upcoming projects and plans (2 hours), and Thursdays would include partaking in the weekly project or onboarding for the Visiting Committee (5 hours). My placement with ECPJS began with a plethora of background research and administrative work. The journal entry from my first week of placement reads,

This week was the first week of my placement at ECPJS. It has entailed a lot of preliminary paperwork and background research on the organization and their projects. My supervisor Laura mentioned that this is one of the first student placements they have had, so we will be working closely together on some projects as they get a feel for how to delegate tasks to a practicum student. During our first meeting Laura and I went over the tentative plan for the semester and our plans for action. Very excited to get started and work with a demographic that I have advocated for throughout my undergraduate degree.

Within that first meeting and week of placement I was assigned my first project which was to refine the inmate call log and streamline it so that it was easier to input their information during their phone calls. Having a more defined and organized call log also assists in the formulation of stats from the inmates concerns which help when applying to grants, receiving donor funding, and writing legal reports. This task involved external research on excel programming as I was unfamiliar with creating multiple dependent dropdown lists. Through this task I was able to enhance my excel proficiency as well as familiarizing myself with the main

concerns of inmate callers. After creating the multiple dependent drop-down lists that provided the Visiting Committee volunteer with streamlined options to obtain information from the calls they received, I spent the following two weeks uploading the information from calls that were received and tracked on the old logs on to the new excel sheet I helped create. This task was quite tedious and not initially rewarding as it was very behind the scenes work that had little interaction with inmates and my supervisor. However, looking back I am able to see how important it was to get familiarized with the content of the calls as well as the databases of ECPJS so that I was able to jump into my final role of being a Visiting Committee phone line volunteer.

Middle of Practicum: Overcoming Roadblocks

Throughout the next few weeks of my placement, Laura and I experienced some setbacks that required us to strategize efficiently and pivot around. For example, Laura unfortunately contracted COVID, and we had to switch our weekly in person meeting to a virtual setting. This situation is a common reality of the current world and demonstrates the flexibility needed to continue working. The following week Laura was away at a conference out of the province, so I was given a list of small administrative tasks to complete while they were away. This work was arguably harder for me to find the self-motivation to complete. As I wrote in my journal entry from week 4,

This week it took me extra focus to not text or email my supervisor for help or guidance and taught me that I need to work on myself discipline when it comes to completing tasks that I may not enjoy. That is an important skill, especially going into the working world post grad, to give your full effort to all assigned tasks.

Additionally, somewhere in the mix of these inconsistent work weeks I was away for reading week which also delayed in-person work. This phase of my placement defined the flexibility and adaptation that is needed when working on projects. While the due dates of projects all remained the same, the external situations did not.

The Final Weeks

Within the final weeks of my placement two students from Dalhousie Schulich School of Law began their pro bono work with ECPJS. This allowed for a collaborative experience that prioritized in-person weekly check-ins and group shadowing Laura on the phone line. These weekly meetings became my favourite work experience from my time with ECPJS as they allowed for workshopping any issues we had on any of our projects with one another.

Specifically, the three of us worked on a project of creating a phone line triage sheet for all Visiting Committee volunteers. This document would have all essential code law, regulations, and contact information regarding the matters inmates would often call the phone line about. I was assigned to write the provisions for information regarding institutional placement, institutional procedures, internal complaints, prison conditions, close confinement, and correctional staff. All three of us worked independently on our research and combined our findings into a final document that will be used by Visiting Committee volunteers going forward. This will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of phone line calls.

The group meetings also provided a safe space for debriefing some of the content we began hearing as we were onboarded to working on the phone line. As the content we would hear from the inmates was extremely confidential but heavy in subject matter, it became somewhat difficult to process the emotions of frustration and anger I would feel after hearing about conditions in Nova Scotia institutions. Specifically, there was a phone call in my eighth week

that brought me to tears. After hearing the pain and frustration in the inmates' voice around the violation they faced, it was a humbling moment that drew the line between the textbook content I have been learning in my Law, Justice, and Society major for the last three years and reality. All the injustices against marginalized communities I had been studying about and addressing within the classroom were being discussed by an individual who was living those injustices as we spoke. The following days I found myself having a difficult time wrapping my head around the way that our society minimizes the human rights of inmates. Much of the content that was being discussed on the phone line was the first time I was hearing about certain issues, even with studying incarceration throughout my degree. It appeared to me how much is being hidden from the general population, but also the general populations lack of urgency to know or to care. Being able to speak about my frustrations and emotions surrounding the call with other students who had heard similar things was very comforting.

Takeaways and Conclusion

Overall, the experience of working with ECPJS was very informative and impactful. I feel as though it gives students a deeper look into the intricacies of human rights complaints within provincial institutions and the limitations that come with finding resolutions. As I wrote in my final journal entry,

I can't believe it is already my last day working with ECPJS as a placement student. I am very grateful that I was given the opportunity to work with this organization this semester. I learned a lot about prison justice that my textbooks have never covered. Real life discussion with inmates brings a new perspective into my understanding of criminal justice and humanizing the people behind the stigma of incarcerated individuals. They are people who made bad choices, but that does not take away their rights as humans. Laura was an incredible supervisor who was able to

keep composure during our many disruptions and always have alternate projects for me to complete virtually. I will recommend volunteering with ECPJS to my peers in the Law, Justice, and Society program.

For any student interested in going into provincial court law, or has an interest in public policy, I would highly recommend this position as an understanding of the provincial criminal code as well as Nova Scotia corrections regulations is developed strongly throughout the placement. I would not recommend this position to students who may take on the emotions of others to the point where it effects their personal lives. I have been told I am an empath, which is an emotional skill that comes with pros and cons. I was able to see the cons of this personality trait of mine throughout this placement as I had a difficult time separating what I heard on the phone line to my personal life outside of the calls. I truly understood what Laura meant by compassion fatigue and sympathize with them as this is their part-time job. I would also not recommend this position to a student who cannot work well in an independent setting. As ECPJS does not have a central office, this means much of the work is virtual from home. Making sure to complete the assigned tasks and stay on track takes a high level of independent motivation and discipline. As Laura was equally as busy with their own commitments, I also did not have step by step guidance on many of the projects. This position requires good problem-solving skills and the ability to teach yourself along the way as you experience challenges. Throughout my placement, all the projects I worked on and information I learned to work on those projects, Laura established that I am eligible to become a Visiting Committee volunteer outside of my course. I will begin my weekly shift working the Visiting Committee phone line starting in April. This will allow me to work on my internalization of emotion skills as well as continuing my education on human rights violations in prison and positively contribute to this often-forgotten

population. I am very grateful for my experience working with ECPJS and the insight it has given me to the world within provincial institutions.