

## Placement at the Canadian Mental Health Association

Poli4390: Practicum Placement in Public Policy: NGOs and Government Services

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The last few months at the Canadian Mental Health Association have been an absolute pleasure. From the staff, my supervisors, my research project, to the members, every aspect of my time at the Canadian Mental Health Association has created an extremely valuable learning experience. During my time with this association, I had two main roles. One being a volunteer with the social clubs and the other doing a research project on loneliness and countries with loneliness ministers. The staff at the Canadian Mental Health Association are very dedicated and care about their work. My supervisors Bev and Marg were committed and enthusiastic about giving me a meaningful and valuable experience. Mikayla and Robyn welcomed me with open arms to help out with the social clubs and very helpful in showing me the ropes. The other volunteers there were also very dedicated to the association. All the staff provided a welcoming environment and gave me the tools I needed to have a meaningful and educational experience.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a nationwide organization that commits to supporting Canadians that are recovering from mental illness and promotes the importance of mental health. One way that they do this is their social programs. As stated above one of my roles with the Canadian Mental Health Association was volunteering with these social clubs. The social clubs provide adults who are experiencing mental illness and mental health concerns with support. Activities are aimed at achieving community inclusion, creativity, and recreation. The social clubs run daily from 1:30pm-4pm, giving the members of the social clubs a variety of diverse activities in the office in Halifax or at the Dartmouth Senior Service Center. Some of the

activities I was volunteering with there was puzzles and card games at the office, coffee and cards at McDonald's, arts and crafts at the office, swimming at the Canada Games Center, and making pancakes at the community kitchen, just to name a few. I was mainly at the office as the day that worked for my supervisors and I was Tuesdays. However, as mentioned earlier there are activities every weekday afternoon. Mikayla and Robyn do an amazing job of making every social club day fun for not only the members, but the volunteers too. I was amazed and impressed by the number of diverse activities at the social clubs. Every member and volunteer could find an activity that they enjoyed or were able to help out with. An activity we did at the social clubs that particularly stood out to me was making pancakes at the community kitchen. This is the perfect example of the goals of the Canadian Mental Health Association. Being at the Canadian Mental Health Association taught me that something that seems as simple as making pancakes can make a huge impact on our society. When making pancakes with the members they are gaining a sense of community and socialization. They are also being creative with toppings and designs. The members are also practicing valuable life skills like cooking. And another important aspect of this was the members getting a meal out of their experience at the social club. Volunteering with the social clubs was a very rewarding and educational experience. It is clear how much of an impact these social clubs make to our society.

The members at the social clubs truly made my experience even more special. Watching the members come in every week and thoroughly enjoy themselves was truly a pleasure to see. Just by talking to the members I quickly realized how much the Canadian Mental Health Association does for their members. When I was being introduced to the members, they were all extremely excited and warmly welcomed me. Although I had just met the members, their excitement to meet a new volunteer showed me how much they valued and adored the staff and

other volunteers. The members talked extremely highly of the other volunteers and staff members and frequently expressed their gratitude to the staff and volunteers. I was also very impressed at the number of friendships and relationships that were started among members. Combating loneliness is a vital part of the Canadian Mental Health Association's goals. The social clubs do exactly that. The relationships the members create with the staff, volunteers, and other members is truly amazing. Hearing the members tell their stories really gave me a different perspective on just how important these social clubs and organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association are to creating a better society.

Another thing that was part of my duties at the Canadian Mental Health Association was volunteering with their food truck Fridays at the Dartmouth Senior Services Center.

Unfortunately, I was only able to come to the food truck Fridays due to when my placement began and cancellation because of weather. Thankfully I have the opportunity to continue volunteering with food truck Fridays outside of my placement. Food truck Fridays are on every second Friday of the month members can come to the Dartmouth Senior Services and collect food and other grocery items. This is a very extensive amount of work that requires a lot of volunteers to get the truck unloaded, sort the food, draw numbers for the order of which every member goes through, and hand out the food. This is a crucial part of the Canadian Mental Health Association as many of the members have food insecurity. Not only does the association provide mental health support, but they also greatly care about the overall wellbeing of the members and providing them with some groceries to alleviate some of the stress of food insecurity is greatly important. Food truck Friday does not just provide groceries for the members, but it also allows for a lot of social interaction. Often the members that frequent the Halifax office do not attend the Dartmouth social clubs as well. So, food truck Fridays gives

members the opportunity to meet other members they would not otherwise get a chance to socialize with. Many friendships have been formed because of food truck Fridays.

Another big part of my placement with the Canadian Mental Health Association was my independent research project. Because volunteering with the social clubs was only 3 hours a week, I had some extra hours during my placement to spend a few hours a week working on a research project. My supervisors Bev and Marg were looking for me to do some research on loneliness ministers. My research entailed looking into what the role of a loneliness minister is, how the position of loneliness minister is created and appointed, and how they are helpful to a country. A lot of my research was looking into other countries that already have a loneliness minister and how and why that position was created in that government. I also looked at the climate of mental health in Canada and compared it to these other countries that have loneliness ministers. By comparing what mental health is like in Canada versus the other countries before and after they appointed a loneliness minister, I was able to evaluate and provide reasoning about why Canadians would benefit from having a loneliness minister. Doing the research project really opened my eyes to the amount of people in Canada and around the world that are living with mental health issues and the amount of people that are in need of support. I used my placement hours throughout the week to search through countless peer reviewed articles, news sources, personal stories, and more to come up with a significant amount of information for Bev and Marg to read over and hopefully use in the future.

Something very important I received from my time with the Canadian Mental Health Association was large improvement in my abilities to talk to and comfort people. Although the social clubs are not meant for direct counselling or mental health crises, many times members would mention the hard times they were having or tell me what they have gone through to be in

the position they are in today. It was very hard hearing some of their stories, but I found comfort in knowing they felt they were in a place that they were comfortable sharing some of their feelings to staff members, volunteers, and other members. Doing this practicum placement has allowed to me refine and better my skills with talking to people and doing the best I could to provide a little bit of comfort. By watching the staff members also comfort and talk to the club members it allowed me to learn from what I was hearing. A lot of the time it seemed as though the best way to deal with the situation when a club member was feeling down and expressing their feelings was to acknowledge that I heard them, and I was listening. I tried to let them know that it's okay to feel down sometimes and the whole reason for the social clubs is to make people feel a bit better. Redirecting the conversation to happy thoughts and focusing on the activity we were doing for the club that day seemed to be the best way to comfort them and make them feel a little better. While I am far beyond a professional in this field and not a councillor of any sorts by any means, I do feel very strongly that this placement greatly helped with my abilities to talk to people in general and to those who require mental health support.

In conclusion, my practicum placement at the Canadian Mental Health Association extremely valuable and educational. Every aspect of my time at the association is a lesson I learned and will take with me and use for the rest of my university experience and in my future career. When I signed up for the course, I really had no idea how useful my experience would be. And by hearing other experiences from students at the meetings for this course I feel as though it would not matter where I was placed, I would get valuable experience at any of the amazing participating organizations. In saying that, I do believe the skills I learned and the knowledge I have obtained from being at the Canadian Mental Health Association are second to none and I would recommend anyone doing a practicum placement or volunteering with them. I am very

grateful to Dr. Denike for creating this program and keeping it going for so long. A lot of social science students do not have the opportunity to have placements like this, so I consider myself very lucky to be a Dalhousie student while Dr. Denike is teaching here. For me and a lot of other students, hands on work and real-life experience is the best form of education and this placement has been easily the most enriching experience of my academic career.