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Final Essay: Practicum Placement at Coverdale Justice Society

I started my Practicum Placement at the Coverdale Justice Society in Halifax, Nova Scotia. When I received confirmation of my placement organization from Dr. Denike, I was thrilled to realize I had been placed with my first choice. Coverdale Justice Society is a non-profit organization that supports the needs of local youth, women, and gender-diverse communities. Coverdale has a specific focus on individuals involved in the legal system, providing resources and support for those who are incarcerated as well as those reintegrating into society. However, their scope extends beyond legal justice support, including a broader variety of social justice initiatives in support of their mission to create a safer, more equal system of justice in the community. Coverdale offers services including court support, bail support, and housing support, working closely with Caitlyn's Place and Honour House. Drop-in services are also offered: their food bank provides grocery cards, community meals and non-perishable foods to clients; the Care Closet provides free clothing alongside self-care and hygiene products; and their virtual court support provides free access to court support workers with the essential skills and supports to aid individuals virtually attending court.

In addition to the services they provide, Coverdale also publishes annual reports, which include but are not limited to court infographics, women and gender diverse crime statistics, organization updates, and educational videos on legal rights. The wide variety of support programs, services, and educational resources offered by Coverdale is reflective of their dedication to providing the community with the necessary resources to support and improve

people's quality of life, regardless of individual circumstances. The branch of Coverdale most relevant to my placement, however, is their Pollinate Program.

Coverdale's Pollinate Program has access to all of the services and resources offered by Coverdale, but its specific focus is on providing support to queer and transgender individuals dealing with legal circumstances, housing issues, domestic violence, addiction, and a number of other areas that lack large-scale systematic aid. Pollinate is composed of queer and trans social workers who possess the professional, educational, and personal experience necessary to address these issues from a queer perspective. I was introduced to the Pollinate Program by Monika Hintz, who was the Executive Director of Coverdale at the time of my placement assignment. Our first meeting was on December seventeenth to get a sense of what the placement would look like once it began in the new year. Having recently assumed the Executive Director role, this was Monika's first time overseeing a placement student at Coverdale, so it was a new experience for the both of us. It was during this initial meeting that she mentioned the Pollinate Program and their focus on queer and trans people. As a queer person myself, the prospect of working at a non-profit organization centered around improving queer and trans rights, alongside queer and trans people no less, was the absolute ideal. I expressed my interest in working with Pollinate to Monika, who was kind enough to put me in contact with them. Thus, I began my placement in early January working with Coverdale's Pollinate Program.

The seventeenth of January was when I had my first meeting with Rae, the project manager at Pollinate and my supervisor for the remainder of the semester. My first impression of Rae over the phone was that they were incredibly kind. However, they informed me that a student placement at Pollinate had been somewhat unexpected, and as such, they didn't have a specific project or work plan established for me coming in. Instead, Rae asked me what I was

passionate about and if there was any specific kind of work that I was interested in doing. While this was different from what I had been expecting for my placement—I was mentally preparing for a regimented schedule and pre-defined workload—it gave me the opportunity to express my interests, passions, and aspirations, and to shape the nature of my placement accordingly. I communicated my interest in doing research on legal policies while also maintaining that I was open to doing any kind of work that would benefit the program. I viewed my placement as an opportunity to learn: to develop my understanding of non-profit, community-centered organizations, to gain an awareness of things that I had not yet been exposed to, and to apply the academic knowledge I had gained through traditional classes to hands-on, real-world situations.

As it turned out, Pollinate consisted entirely of social workers who had little experience with the specifics of Canadian law. Although my personal knowledge was limited to undergraduate law courses, the methodological experience I possessed regarding legal research was welcomed as an asset to Pollinate's initiatives. It was decided that legal research would constitute the majority of the work I would do to support the program. Roughly a week and a half after my initial phone call with Rae, we had our first virtual meeting where I got to meet them and another support worker, Frank, who similarly oversees Pollinate's operations. This meeting was a proper orientation for my placement, where I shared more information about myself, my professional and personal aspirations, and reasserted my passions in social justice. One aspect of this meeting that struck me as unique was their genuine curiosity and interest in my discussion of Native Hawaiian ideologies; when asked who my inspirations were, I named Mari Matsuda—a now retired professor of law at the Richardson School of Law at the University of Hawai'i, in addition to being a dedicated human rights activist and author on critical race, gender, and class theories—as well as the late Haunani-Kay Trask, who was an incredible leader

in Hawaiian nationalist activism and a close friend of Matsuda's. Rae and Frank asked if I could share some resources on their work, which I was more than happy to do. It was refreshing to find myself in the company of people—my supervisors no less—who were genuinely interested in broadening their knowledge of Pacific Islander movements and the figures who made significant contributions to them. There was an atmosphere of curiosity and a willingness to learn that I found to be deeply inspiring.

In the week following this meeting, I was given my first assignment: a policy brief on case conferencing in Canada. For greater context, Rae had explained to me that their primary focus at the moment was providing support for an incarcerated trans woman who had been remanded to a men's prison. Pollinate had been There was an upcoming meeting with a few directors and social workers who worked at the women's prison in a few weeks, and we wanted to come up with a plan to present to hopefully get Pollinate's support network more involved in the woman's case. The goal for my research project was to compile detailed information on provincial case conferencing policies and procedures across Canada, in addition to researching the relationship between community support systems and federal and provincial prisons.

I quickly realized that this project was going to be more complicated than I had anticipated. I began by combing through the Commissioner's Directive 100: Gender Diverse Offenders, which outlines the procedural changes made in Canada's Correctional Services and institutions in an effort to support gender diverse offenders. While this wasn't a specific request for the project, I wanted to be thorough and clarify what, exactly, due process should look like in the case of this trans woman and her prison transfers, in order to provide an outline of relevant sections for my supervisors so that they could refer to them without having to take the time to sift through dozens of sections of policy and legal jargon. This component of the brief took several

hours itself. I then moved on to case conferencing research, looking for provincial policies that would provide an example of greater social worker involvement in certain criminal cases. Case conferencing is essentially a meeting between the offender, their legal representative, and community support workers to discuss the case and its proceedings. However, in my research I discovered that there was very little information on social worker's involvement in case conferencing—at least on a systemic level—let alone policies dedicated to creating space for community support systems as a component of procedural justice. Having realized that the path forward was not nearly as straightforward as I was expecting, I turned to an area of the law that had more extensive and established policies on case conferencing that granted social workers greater authority: youth criminal justice. Minors are considered a vulnerable class, and as such the involvement of social workers and community supports generally has more backing from the government. In the composition of this brief, I documented specific provincial case conferencing policies from British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories, to use as an example of and outline for the procedural duties of social workers in orchestrating case conferences. The core focus of this research was to find a legal precedent that would support an increase in communication between correctional workers and social workers. I submitted the completed brief in mid-February.

After submitting this brief, Rae requested that I create an additional document with more specifics of what a social worker's role and responsibilities could look like in other contexts besides youth justice. I created the Addendum to the Case Conferencing Policy Report to establish a justified reasoning for increasing social worker's involvement in case conferences, with a specific focus on queer and transgender offenders. Much of the reasoning used to identify youth as vulnerable—and therefore entitled to increased social work and community

support—could also be extrapolated to identify queer and trans people as a vulnerable population deserving of similar increases in support. Drawing on policies from the Northwest Territories mentioned in the original brief, I outlined the general procedural duties and responsibilities of the social worker, the purpose and procedural steps of completing case planning, and a brief conclusion to summarize my findings. This Addendum was submitted shortly after the initial report.

My work was well received by my supervisor, and towards the end of February I joined a string of virtual meetings to present it to my supervisors and a number of other support workers from other local organizations, such as the Elizabeth Fry Society and East Coast Prison Justice; we had formed a kind of queer coalition to support the trans woman wrongly placed in a men's prison. We first held a pre-meeting to prepare for the main one, where we would be meeting with executives and social workers from a local women's correctional facility to discuss the case of the trans woman's placement. In the pre-meeting, I presented the documents I had been working on, the content of which was met with a positive response from representatives of the other organizations present. During the main meeting, I simply introduced myself and observed my supervisors and their co-workers discuss the matter at hand with workers from the correctional facility, which was a highly educational experience. We concluded the day with a post-meeting debrief to discuss the main meeting and plan next steps.

On March seventh, our coalition met in-person at Coverdale's office. Another aspect of Coverdale that I believe is worth mentioning is that all workers mask on-site; as someone who does my best to be Covid-conscious myself, I deeply appreciated their commitment to taking precautions to ensure everyone's safety. It reflects a level of community awareness and genuine care that only increased my respect for the team. In this meeting, we considered what supports

could be offered to the trans women both presently and upon her reintegration. In addition to this discussion, we also ended up talking about the current conditions of non-profit organizations and funding issues. This was a conversation that provided me with an awareness and knowledge of how underfunded, and arguably neglected, community support systems and organizations currently are. It was difficult to hear the personal experiences of individuals at the meeting, but the way that everyone came together to try and find solutions or reduce the stress and workloads of certain positions was inspiring. To know that there are still people working diligently to support every aspect of their community, to improve the overall quality of life for everyone committed to this process, gave me hope for the future.

At present, I am continuing to work with Pollinate, and intend to do so until I move away in July. I am currently tasked with another research project focused on restorative justice policy and frameworks, which will be submitted in the next week or so. This placement was nothing like I expected, in the best way possible. I had envisioned a strict schedule and workload, but soon came to realize that the nature of community support work is hardly linear, and faces a variety of obstacles in the pursuit of justice. Every single person I have had the pleasure of working with is equally dedicated to addressing the pervasive issues of queer and trans rights, accessible housing, food security, healthcare, employment, addiction and harm reduction, and sex trafficking, all while maintaining the importance of creating spaces for joy and self-expression through music and art. I have obtained invaluable knowledge, and intend to continue to do so for as long as I am able, contributing to Pollinate's initiatives in whatever ways I am able. When I leave Nova Scotia, I will take this knowledge with me and apply it to the work I will do elsewhere. I could not have been granted a better placement, or one that was more aligned with my interests. I am deeply appreciative of the opportunities this course has provided.