

Dalhousie Legal Aid Service Practicum Experience

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This report outlines my experience as a practicum student at Dalhousie Legal Aid during the Winter Semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. Throughout my placement, I was exposed to various aspects of legal aid work, gaining first hand experience in social justice advocacy, tenant rights, and child welfare law. Dalhousie Legal Aid is a community-based legal clinic affiliated with Dalhousie University's Schulich School of Law. It provides free legal services to low-income individuals in Nova Scotia while also serving as a training ground for law students. The clinic focuses on social justice, housing rights, family law, child welfare, and tenant advocacy. Additionally, it engages in public legal education and systemic advocacy on issues affecting marginalized communities. Dalhousie Legal Aid also plays a significant role in public legal education and systemic advocacy.

My first week was very similar to the average first week in a new job. During my orientation I was introduced to the clinic's structure, mission, and the various legal services it provides to the community. This included learning about confidentiality and signing privacy and confidentiality agreements to ensure my compliance with ethical and legal obligations regarding client information. These documents emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality and handling sensitive legal matters with discretion. I also had the opportunity to observe various clients coming into the clinic seeking legal assistance for various reasons. Many of them were facing significant hardships— evictions, social assistance disputes, or challenges with the welfare system. It quickly became clear that for many, this was one of the lowest points of their lives, where they felt overwhelmed, powerless, and uncertain about their future. Witnessing these struggles first hand reinforced the importance of approaching legal work with

empathy and compassion. I learned that beyond understanding the law, being a strong advocate also means recognizing the human impact of legal issues and ensuring that clients feel heard, respected, and supported throughout the process. Most of the clients who sought help from the clinic are individuals who face barriers to accessing justice due to various personal reasons. Without legal aid services, many vulnerable individuals would be left without the means to defend their rights or navigate complex legal systems. This is why I am so humbled by my experience working within the clinic. Being there has ultimately deepened my commitment to social justice and ensuring that the law serves not only those who can afford representation. This experience has been invaluable in shaping my understanding of the law's role in addressing inequality and the responsibility legal professionals have in fostering a more just society.

During my placement, I participated in various tasks and projects that provided insight into different aspects of legal aid work. I was allowed to attend any internal lectures hosted by Dalhousie Legal Aid that I was able to, where I gained deeper insights into legal frameworks, advocacy strategies, and best practices in legal aid work. I made sure to attend as many of these sessions as I could, as each offered unique insights into various legal frameworks, advocacy strategies, and best practices in legal aid work. These sessions not only deepened my understanding of the legal system but also provided me with real-world examples of how law is applied in the daily work of a legal aid office. The first one I sat in on was about how to have a meeting with a client. I was able to see in action what it looks like for a legal counsel to engage with a client and it was very eye opening. I also attended a lesson on family law. A family lawyer explained the process of family law in Nova Scotia as well as recounting her

experiences as a family lawyer. I found all of the lectures I was able to attend to be incredibly enriching as I prepare to enter law school. As someone who is still unsure of which legal field will be the best fit for me, these firsthand accounts and real-world insights into the realities of law practice have been invaluable. They allowed me to consider how I would approach different legal challenges and what skills and qualities I would need to develop as a future lawyer. Whether through exploring the interpersonal dynamics of client meetings or learning about the legal intricacies of family law, each experience added a new layer of understanding that will undoubtedly help shape my law school journey and future career path. Moreover, my exposure to these diverse legal fields allowed me to better understand the importance of finding a field that aligns with both my professional interests and personal values. I now feel more confident in approaching law school with a clearer sense of what to expect and with a broader perspective on the different opportunities available to me within the legal profession. This experience has truly helped me refine my goals and better understand the type of lawyer I aspire to be.

Dalhousie Legal Aid has a social justice clinic where they provide free legal information to community members. The clinic happens twice a week and during these sessions individuals are able to drop in and speak to law students or community legal workers about their issue. The topics are often about housing or poverty issues. Throughout the term I was fortunate enough to sit in on several social justice intake sessions, observing how the individuals collect information and provide clear and information helpful to those who come in. As I am not in law school yet I am not able to provide any information to these clients, however, I am able to practice taking notes and

learn about the information that applies to their issues. Getting to learn about the kinds of questions to ask clients and how to find information vital to them is incredibly helpful to me.

I also had the opportunity to learn about residential tenancy issues by assisting one of the clinic's community legal workers on his research on landlord-tenant issues in Nova Scotia. This experience allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of tenant rights, eviction procedures, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Additionally I was able to gain hands-on experience with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIPOP) process by preparing an application to request government-held information. This task enhanced my research skills and reinforced the importance of transparency and access to information in legal advocacy. I also conducted a review of a newly enacted bylaw to assess its implications for tenants living in manufactured home parks. Dalhousie Legal Aid has an information booklet on tenants rights when living in these homes and I was responsible with comparing the information in that document with the new bylaw. The analysis I provided was essential to ensure that the information within the guide remains accurate and reflective of current legal standards. This experience strengthened my ability to interpret and apply legal frameworks while contributing to a valuable resource that empowers tenants knowledge of their rights.

Another aspect of my placement was filing paperwork. Although it does seem like the most entertaining work I am grateful to have had the opportunity to do it as it will be beneficial for any job that I apply for within the legal sphere. I worked on filing various cases, reviewing court files, and organizing email and phone records. Through this process, I developed a strong understanding of case management and the importance

of maintaining detailed and accurate records. Learning how to properly file legal documents and manage case materials has enhanced my organizational skills and provided me with a clearer understanding of the procedural aspects of legal work.

One project that I worked on during my practicum, which I found to be the most rewarding, was research on Child Welfare law in Canada. I had the privilege of assisting a lawyer at the clinic by completing initial research for them. This project provided me with an opportunity to delve deeply into a highly complex and crucial aspect of legal practice, and it significantly shaped my understanding between law, social justice, and Indigenous rights. My research focused on understanding the fundamental principles of child welfare law and analysing how legislation and policies vary across different provinces. This involved reviewing the legal frameworks governing child protection, the responsibilities of child welfare agencies, and the rights of children and families in various circumstances. I researched how different provinces and territories implement child welfare law. This task required me to navigate complex statutory materials and case law, gaining insights into how the legal system responds to child protection concerns. As part of my research, I also examined the colonial legacy of child protection in Canada. Historically, the child welfare system has been used as a tool of colonialism, displacing Indigenous children from their families and communities through various damaging policies. Through this exploration of the colonial legacy, I came to understand how deeply ingrained biases and systemic inequalities continue to influence child welfare practices today. I researched how the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care is not just a contemporary issue but is rooted in colonial policies designed to undermine Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Additionally, I examined Bill C-92, which affirms the rights of Indigenous people in relation to child and family services and established national standards for Indigenous child welfare. I was able to look into various ways the law is being used currently and see whether or not it is making the impact it intended. Bill C-92 represents an important step toward addressing this legacy, but I also recognized that true reconciliation will require further structural changes, including increased funding for Indigenous-led child welfare services and a commitment to reversing the harms caused by past policies. This research project not only expanded my knowledge of child welfare law but also allowed me to see the intersectionality between family law, Indigenous rights, and social justice. It highlighted for me the importance of understanding the broader historical, cultural, and social contexts in which legal frameworks operate.

Beyond my academic and practical exploration I was also able to witness the clinical law experience that third year law students undergo firsthand. I saw how Dalhousie Legal Aid plays a crucial role in training future lawyers, providing them with hands-on experiences in advocacy, client interaction, and case management. Seeing law students work on actual cases and receive mentorship from practicing lawyers gave me insight into how law school gives you opportunities to integrate theory with practice. One of the most impactful aspects of this experience was having the opportunity to connect with law students. Through conversations with them, I gained a clear understanding of the law school journey, the challenges they face, and the skills they are developing. These connections not only gave me practical advice on preparing for law school but also reinforced my determination to pursue a legal career.

Ultimately, this practicum solidified my passion for law and confirmed that this is the path I want to take. Seeing law students in action, providing access to legal resources, and experiencing the clinical legal environment made me excited about the opportunities that law school will provide. Furthermore, this experience has confirmed that I will be working towards my own placement at Dalhousie Legal Aid when I am in law school.