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POLI 4390: Practicum Placement in Public Policy

April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025

### **Written Report: The East Coast Prison Justice Society**

My experience working with the East Coast Prison Justice Society (ECPJS) as a phone worker was deeply impactful and intellectually stimulating, providing critical insights into the systemic issues within Nova Scotia's correctional system. This role profoundly shaped my understanding of the lived realities of incarcerated individuals and heightened my awareness of prisons as sites of systemic neglect, particularly for marginalized communities routinely subjected to harsh and degrading treatment.

ECPJS is a non-profit organization established in 2017, dedicated to advancing social justice by advocating for the rights and interests of criminalized and imprisoned people. It functions as a hub for prison justice advocacy on the East Coast, working in solidarity with incarcerated individuals across various initiatives. ECPJS brings together volunteers, legal experts, academics, and community members to raise awareness of issues affecting prisoners and to push for systemic change through research, public campaigns, legal support, and direct services. Its mission explicitly highlights addressing the socio-economic, political, and institutional inequalities impacting marginalized communities in Nova Scotia and the Atlantic

region. In practical terms, ECPJS engages in monitoring prison conditions, reporting on human rights concerns, and advocating for reforms and better treatment of those behind bars.

The cornerstone of ECPJS's work is ensuring transparency and accountability in the incarceration system. ECPJS's Visiting Committee (VC) project epitomizes this mission. The VC is a jail-monitoring initiative that engages in both individualized support and broader systemic advocacy to protect prisoners' rights in Nova Scotia's provincial jails. The VC project has three main objectives: (1) to monitor conditions of confinement for potential human rights violations, (2) to report findings publicly (through reports and publications) thereby contributing to transparency, and (3) to advocate for incarcerated persons, both on individual issues and on systemic policy levels. This mandate aligns closely with ECPJS's overall goal of shining light on the often-hidden world of prisons and pushing authorities to address injustices.

One of the primary tools by which the VC fulfills its mandate is a toll-free phone line for prisoners. Originally centered around in-person visits, the VC adapted to pandemic-related restrictions by establishing a toll-free phone line, increasing accessibility to advocacy services. Through this platform, ECPJS monitors prison conditions, publicly and directly reports findings to correctional institutions, and engages in systemic and individual advocacy. Through this VC phone line, people incarcerated in Nova Scotia's provincial institutions can call for free on designated days to voice concerns about their treatment and conditions. The line operates three days a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays) with scheduled hours, providing a regular outlet for inmates to seek help or report grievances. When calls come in, volunteer call operators (like myself) answer and log each call in a secure database. Every call is documented in detail, including the date/time, the caller's identity (kept confidential outside the project), and the issues

or complaints discussed. This systematic logging enables ECPJS to track patterns and identify key systemic issues emerging across the prison population. Importantly, the information gathered is not merely archived; it is actively used to bring concerns to the attention of prison authorities and oversight bodies. For example, recurring or serious issues are raised with facility superintendents, the provincial correctional healthcare manager, and even Nova Scotia's Office of the Ombudsperson. In this way, the phone line serves as an early-warning and accountability mechanism, channeling prisoners' voices to those with power to remedy problems.

In addition to monitoring and reporting, the VC phone line project provides direct assistance to callers. ECPJS volunteers offer referrals to relevant resources or agencies, help callers navigate internal prison procedures (such as how to file request or complaint forms), liaise with prison staff on a caller's behalf when appropriate, and guide individuals through external complaint mechanisms, for example how to contact the Ombudsperson or Human Rights Commission. The phone line thus not only documents issues but also attempts to resolve them where possible, embodying ECPJS's dual mandate of supporting individuals and advocating for systemic change. My primary responsibilities included answering incoming calls from incarcerated individuals, meticulously documenting each interaction, and identifying systemic issues for advocacy purposes. Callers frequently reported problems such as inadequate healthcare services, restrictive lockdown practices, procedural obstacles in internal grievance systems, and broader institutional neglect. The structured process of logging details such as the date, time, caller identification (when voluntarily provided), and specific concerns enabled effective monitoring and informed advocacy strategies.

During my practicum, I served as a Phone Line Volunteer under the supervision of the VC Coordinator. My role was to operate the VC phone line during my assigned shifts and to contribute to the follow-up advocacy work stemming from the calls. The key responsibilities I undertook included: Answering incoming calls from incarcerated individuals in provincial jails, engaging in emotional support and communication, and documenting grievances. I followed a prescribed call script and protocol to greet the caller, verify consent to proceed, and listen actively to their concerns. Often, this meant allowing the caller to narrate their situation or grievance in detail, while I took notes and asked clarifying questions when needed. Another significant part of the role was providing a compassionate listening ear. Many callers were experiencing distress, frustration, or anxiety. I offered empathy, validated their feelings, and maintained a calm, respectful tone even when callers were upset or angry. In moments when a caller simply needed to vent or talk, including instances where no new complaint was raised, I served as emotional support. For example, if someone was lonely or anxious, I would patiently engage with them, acknowledging their feelings and assuring them that their voice mattered. This aspect of the work required emotional intelligence, patience, and strong communication skills to build trust with callers who often felt disillusioned or unheard by the system. For each call, I logged detailed notes in the VC call log system. I documented the nature of the issues reported, any relevant context (e.g. if it was a recurring problem or if internal complaints had already been filed), and the personal impact on the caller. Accuracy and thoroughness in documentation were critical, as these records form the basis for ECPJS's reporting and advocacy. I categorized complaints under predefined issue headings such as healthcare, use of force, and discrimination to help aggregate data. In practice, the grievances I recorded ranged widely. Common issues included inadequate medical care (for instance, delays in getting medications or

denial of specialist appointments), mental health crises going untreated, poor living conditions (unsanitary cells, poor food quality), excessive use of lockdowns or solitary confinement, lack of access to family visits or legal counsel, and allegations of discrimination (for example, Indigenous inmates being denied access to cultural practices, or lack of accommodation for religious diets). This documentation work honed my attention to detail and taught me how to summarize complex, emotionally charged stories into clear, factual reports.

One of the most profound learnings from my practicum was a deepened understanding of prisons as sites of systemic neglect, especially for those from marginalized communities. Before this experience, I had an abstract academic awareness that incarcerated populations are often underserved and overlooked. However, directly hearing dozens of personal accounts of incarceration conditions exposed me to the harsh, concrete realities of neglect in the carceral system. As I took call after call, clear patterns emerged indicating that neglect and rights violations were not isolated incidents but rather systemic in nature. Prisoners from different facilities consistently reported similar issues, suggesting institutional failures. For instance, medical neglect was a recurring theme. Callers frequently described being denied timely healthcare, such as not receiving prescribed medications, experiencing long waits or outright refusal for doctor appointments, or having critical treatments (like opioid agonist therapy for addictions) abruptly cut off upon admission.

One of the most striking aspects of my role was handling calls during institutional lockdowns. Callers often described severe and oppressive conditions, characterized by prolonged confinement, restricted access to basic services, and a lack of transparency from correctional authorities regarding the reasons for lockdowns. Documenting these experiences was crucial,

providing critical information to support systemic advocacy aimed at increasing accountability and transparency within the correctional system. Beyond healthcare and isolation, I also noted neglect in terms of basic living conditions and programming. Prisoners commonly complained about the poor quality of food (meals described as nutritionally inadequate), lack of cleanliness (dirty ranges, mold, infestations), and limited access to rehabilitative programs or even outdoor exercise.

Beyond specific issues, a significant portion of my role involved serving as an emotional support system for prisoners who frequently called simply to talk. Many incarcerated individuals faced extreme isolation, poor mental health resources, and severe emotional distress. These calls did not always involve new grievances but highlighted the profound impact that incarceration and systemic neglect have on mental health and emotional well-being. The sheer frequency of these support-oriented interactions underscored the necessity for improved mental health services within correctional institutions.

A particularly challenging aspect of my role was learning to navigate the complex realities of advocacy work. I quickly learned that not everyone fits the simplistic notion of a "perfect victim"; many callers had complicated backgrounds and were often overlooked or dismissed as undeserving of support due to their past actions or circumstances. This reality demanded a careful balancing act, pushing me to recognize and advocate for individuals often forgotten or stigmatized by society, emphasizing the importance of unconditional compassion and support.

The grassroots orientation of ECPJS, emphasizing direct service, systemic advocacy, public education, and an unwavering commitment to decarceration, was especially inspiring. The

dedication of the ECPJS team to supporting those who society often labels as undeserving resonated deeply with me. Their commitment demonstrated a genuine care for individuals who have often been victims of compounding abuses, neglect, and systemic injustices themselves. Confronting the emotional and psychological demands inherent in advocacy work highlighted the necessity of self-care and maintaining professional boundaries. Regularly engaging with individuals experiencing acute distress, trauma, and frustration required emotional resilience and practical coping mechanisms. This dimension of my practicum deepened my understanding of the complexities involved in social justice advocacy, reinforcing my dedication to systemic reform.

Moreover, my experience working with ECPJS significantly complemented my honours thesis, which explores the failures of *Gladue* principles and how carceral institutions perpetuate systemic harm and neglect against marginalized communities. Through direct interactions with incarcerated individuals, I observed firsthand the stark disparity between reforms aimed at reducing harm, such as *Gladue*, and the practical reality faced by prisoners daily. This role provided concrete, lived examples of how systemic neglect operates within the prison environment, highlighting that these institutions frequently exacerbate rather than alleviate the vulnerabilities of already marginalized populations. By witnessing consistent patterns of inadequate healthcare, insufficient mental health support, and punitive isolation practices, my practicum experience underscored and deepened my analytical perspective on the ways prisons serve as active sites of systemic neglect and injustice, enriching my thesis research.

My role at the East Coast Prison Justice Society was profoundly rewarding and enlightening, significantly enhancing my understanding of the systemic neglect within

correctional institutions. The practical insights and lived experiences shared by incarcerated callers greatly informed my analytical perspectives on the pervasive injustices within the carceral system, fundamentally strengthening my commitment to advocating for prison reform and justice for marginalized and underserved communities.