

Nova Scotia Legal Aid (NSLA) is a publicly funded organization dedicated to providing legal assistance to individuals across Nova Scotia who face financial and social barriers to accessing justice. Its primary mission is to ensure fair and equitable treatment within the legal system by offering a variety of legal services, including informational resources, advice, and full representation in court to those who qualify. NSLA particularly focuses on assisting historically disadvantaged populations, such as Indigenous communities, African Nova Scotians, and economically vulnerable individuals.

The purpose of my practicum placement at the Dartmouth Criminal Law Office of Nova Scotia Legal Aid was to gain practical, hands-on experience in the field of criminal law while contributing to the organization's broader mandate of supporting equitable justice. This placement was designed to combine academic learning with real-world application, allowing me to observe and participate in the daily responsibilities of legal professionals. Throughout this paper, I will describe my experiences and responsibilities during my placement, reflecting specifically on my observations in court, interactions with clients, and assistance in preparing cases. Additionally, I will discuss the insights gained about the complexities and challenges within the criminal justice system, highlighting NSLA's role in promoting justice and equity for vulnerable groups.

Nova Scotia Legal Aid provides legal services to individuals across the province who cannot easily afford private lawyers. The organization aims to ensure fair access to justice, particularly for those experiencing financial hardship or from historically marginalized groups. They offer different types of legal support, including legal information, advice, and full legal representation. General legal information is available to all Nova Scotians through various

resources and publications. Additionally, Duty Counsel lawyers provide immediate, short-term legal advice to anyone facing charges or in police custody. For more comprehensive support, NSLA assigns lawyers to fully represent clients, though eligibility depends on meeting certain financial, legal, and merit-based criteria.

The organization as a whole handles several areas of law, such as criminal matters, family law issues like divorce and custody disputes, and civil cases involving social justice concerns like income assistance and employment insurance. However, the Dartmouth Criminal Law office solely deals with criminal cases. NSLA places significant emphasis on equity and supporting vulnerable populations. It actively addresses historical inequalities within the justice system by offering targeted assistance to Indigenous peoples, African Nova Scotians, immigrants, and economically disadvantaged individuals. NSLA's services aim to improve access to justice for those who face substantial barriers.

The Dartmouth Criminal Law Office of NSLA is a branch dedicated specifically to criminal law cases, including matters such as impaired driving, assault, theft, drug-related charges, and more serious offences. My practicum placement at this office was structured to allow me to engage directly in the daily operations of a busy criminal law practice, providing a practical application of my academic knowledge and an authentic understanding of criminal justice processes.

Throughout my practicum, I shadowed experienced criminal lawyers and observed their interactions with clients, court officials, and other legal professionals. My responsibilities included reviewing disclosures alongside them and assisting lawyers in preparing cases for court. I regularly participated in client meetings where the lawyers helped clarify case details and made

sure clients understood their legal situations. Additionally, I attended court sessions to witness firsthand the realities of the criminal justice system, observing sentencing hearings, preliminary inquiries, and trials.

My primary supervisors at the Dartmouth office were Bruce Muir and Harry Critchley. Bruce Muir is a highly experienced criminal lawyer who provided valuable mentorship, guiding me through complex cases and court procedures. I also had the privilege of working closely with Harry Critchley, whose dedication and commitment to criminal law and social justice profoundly influenced my understanding of the field. Sadly, Mr. Critchley recently passed away, which has been deeply felt by everyone at NSLA and the broader legal community. Both supervisors greatly enriched my practicum experience and significantly shaped my perspective on the crucial role Nova Scotia Legal Aid plays in promoting fair access to justice.

During my practicum placement, I spent a great deal of time at the Dartmouth Provincial Court where I had the opportunity to observe a range of criminal proceedings and attend preliminary client interactions and meetings. My initial experiences included observing varied cases such as firearms-related charges, impaired driving charges, and hearings involving curfew breaches and sentencing schedules. Witnessing these diverse cases provided insight into courtroom procedures, judicial decision-making, and how sentences are determined based on circumstances. Following these court observations, I assisted criminal lawyers by reviewing detailed disclosures and evidence provided by the Crown for ongoing cases, including vehicular aggravated assault and criminal harassment. My role often involved careful note-taking, assessing evidence relevancy, and preparing for subsequent client discussions. I also participated directly in client interactions, such as sitting in on calls from detained individuals seeking Duty Counsel advice and calls from individuals held in custody at facilities such as Burnside Jail.

As my placement progressed, my involvement deepened into specific criminal cases, especially those involving conditional sentence order (CSO) breaches and guilty pleas. I closely observed the procedural complexities of a CSO breach, including arguments to terminate conditional sentences and the associated custodial decisions. I also learned the procedural nuances of arranging court adjournments, setting plea dates, and the issuance of warrants due to non-responsive defendants. Another valuable learning experience was witnessing a Drug Recognition Evaluation (DRE) trial and associated voir dire. I carefully observed the detailed testimony of a Halifax Regional Police DRE officer, who explained the comprehensive twelve-step evaluation used to assess impairment from substances. This included expert witness examination, introduction of exhibits, and cross-examination by defense counsel, which was insightful for understanding courtroom strategies and the significant role expert witnesses play in criminal cases.

Much of my daily activities involved assisting with the preparation of client files for upcoming court appearances, reviewing detailed disclosures alongside lawyers, attending morning client meetings, and observing court sessions during the afternoon. My work involved organizing and reviewing evidentiary documents for criminal charges. In intake court sessions, I observed first-hand the crucial initial stages of criminal proceedings, including scheduling and preliminary discussions. Observing a robbery sentencing also allowed me to understand sentencing rationale, judicial discretion, and considerations for plea negotiations and joint sentencing recommendations. Regular client meetings deepened my understanding of the personalized and often emotional nature of criminal defense work, emphasizing effective communication and empathy.

Later stages of my practicum involved managing more complex client interactions and observing negotiations around sensitive matters such as impaired driving charges with potential immigration consequences. Assisting clients through interpreter-mediated conversations provided insight into additional barriers faced by non-English speaking individuals in accessing justice. This experience required careful listening, patience, and precise communication to accurately capture the client's situation and relay legal advice effectively. Moreover, reviewing disclosures in impaired driving cases taught me to identify critical legal issues and potential areas for negotiation. I also observed counsel negotiating with the Crown Attorney to advocate effectively for fair charges and sentencing, which offered practical examples of advocacy skills essential for criminal law practitioners.

Throughout my practicum placement at the Dartmouth Criminal Law Office of Nova Scotia Legal Aid, I gained a deeper appreciation for the critical role Legal Aid and Duty Counsel lawyers play within the criminal justice system. Observing their day-to-day operations highlighted the essential support provided to clients who otherwise lack adequate legal representation. Duty Counsel lawyers, who provide immediate, on-the-spot legal advice to individuals facing charges, proved especially vital. Their presence ensures fairness and reduces confusion and anxiety for individuals navigating complex court procedures, often for the first time.

My observations exposed me to several practical realities of the criminal justice system. Among these was the notable frequency of delays and adjournments, which often caused frustration for clients eager to resolve their legal issues swiftly. Witnessing these delays first-hand clarified how logistical challenges and procedural complexities within the justice system

can significantly extend case timelines, sometimes leaving individuals in prolonged uncertainty about their futures.

Financial barriers were another significant issue that became evident during my placement. Many clients struggled to afford legal representation outside of Nova Scotia Legal Aid, and the restrictive financial qualifications for accessing full legal support underscored how economic status greatly influences one's experience within the justice system. Seeing individuals unable to afford private counsel and yet not always meeting the threshold for full Legal Aid services emphasized the reality of financial inequity and the resulting potential for unequal justice.

I was particularly impressed by NSLA's approach to client support. The organization's commitment to equity initiatives, notably its targeted support for Indigenous communities, African Nova Scotians, and economically disadvantaged individuals, reinforced the importance of a culturally sensitive and inclusive legal practice. Witnessing these intentional efforts demonstrated that justice is not just about legal representation but also about acknowledging and actively addressing the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups.

On a personal level, my practicum experience was highly enriching, challenging, and informative. I was surprised by the emotional weight that comes with criminal law practice, particularly the direct interactions with individuals facing life-altering legal situations. These interactions taught me invaluable lessons in empathy, patience, and clear communication. The mentorship provided by experienced lawyers, including Bruce Muir and the late Harry Critchley, significantly shaped my understanding of criminal law and justice. Their guidance and dedication underscored the impact committed professionals have in promoting fairness and

equity within the legal system. Overall, my placement at NSLA has profoundly shaped my perspective on criminal justice, highlighting the essential need for continued advocacy and support for equitable legal access.

My placement was an exceptionally valuable and insightful experience, significantly enriching my academic studies with practical knowledge. Engaging closely with experienced legal professionals provided me with a comprehensive understanding of criminal law procedures, client advocacy, and the intricacies of navigating the justice system. Observing firsthand the critical importance of accessible legal representation reinforced my understanding of how crucial Legal Aid services are in ensuring fairness and equity within the judicial process.

Through my daily responsibilities, such as client interactions, reviewing disclosures, and attending court proceedings, I developed greater confidence, communication skills, and a nuanced appreciation of the complexities within criminal law. The placement notably broadened my perspective on systemic barriers that disadvantaged populations face, further deepening my commitment to advocating for accessible justice. It also allowed for meaningful personal and professional growth. It challenged my assumptions, enhanced my empathy, and solidified my interest in pursuing a career dedicated to social justice and legal advocacy. The profound mentorship and guidance provided by Bruce Muir and Harry Critchley, as well as interactions with the broader team, were instrumental in shaping my professional outlook and ambitions.

I am immensely grateful to Nova Scotia Legal Aid, the Dartmouth Criminal Law Office, and my supervisors for their generosity, support, and willingness to share their invaluable expertise. The practical experiences and insights gained from this placement will undoubtedly guide and inspire my future endeavors in the field of law and advocacy.