

Practicum at Nova Scotia Legal Aid: Criminal Office (January-April 2026)

For my practicum placement with POLI4390 at Dalhousie University, I was placed at the Nova Scotia Legal Aid, Dartmouth Criminal Law Office. Nova Scotia Legal Aid is a provincial service that is available to both adults and youth on various legal matters and issues. At the Dartmouth Criminal Legal Aid Office, the primary focus is on assisting individuals with legal issues within the field of criminal law. Nova Scotia Legal Aid, in the criminal section, provides advice in the form of Duty Counsel at the courts, and advice over the telephone if the individual is in custody. Legal advice differs from legal representation, as advice provided by Nova Scotia Legal Aid does not place an individual directly with a specific lawyer; it is offered on an as-needed basis and often results in referral to other services Legal Aid provides. In the Dartmouth Legal Aid Office, many lawyers are those who provide full representation for individuals who have applied for legal aid to assist with their matters, and have met the qualifications regarding financial and merit-based circumstances.

In my placement, I worked within the criminal law office, shadowing a criminal defence lawyer, Bruce Muir. This role entailed following Mr. Muir in his daily routine and schedule for the day. In this position, we would often start our days at the Nova Scotia Legal Aid Criminal Office and would go back and forth between there and the Dartmouth Provincial Courthouse. My role within this practicum was primarily one of shadowing, though Mr. Muir did provide brief assignments to do throughout the weeks. In my experience, I was given two assignments: summarizing a Supreme Court of Canada case, and also searching for different cases that constituted the same charge, but provided different sentences for each offender depending on the circumstances. These assignments were done outside of my time being physically at Nova Scotia

Legal Aid for practicum, but there would often be cases in court that were closely related to the research, or it would become an interesting conversation to have in the office.

On most days in my practicum, Mr. Muir and I would meet at the office and go over his clients for morning court appearances at the Dartmouth Provincial Court. Some of these clients we would call and get information on how to proceed for the morning's matters, and others we would simply review the file in preparation, as Bruce had already spoken with them. Legal aid lawyers are also assigned individuals who have begun the process of applying to legal aid for assistance, but have not provided their income information, which creates a barrier to them receiving legal services. Mr. Muir, alongside his peers within the Dartmouth Criminal Legal Aid Office, is given these clients, even when their income information has not been processed. In these circumstances, these individuals often have their cases adjourned to a future date in order to submit financial information, as legal aid is unable to provide its services if proof of income eligibility is not available. Once the individual provides their income information, they are either taken on by a legal aid lawyer or provided a certificate to go into the community and receive services from a lawyer who provides assistance on legal aid certificate matters. During my practicum, I learned that legal aid separates how individuals are filtered through, whether they get an in-office lawyer or a certificate lawyer. When a potential legal aid client applies, there is a conflict check done. If there is a conflict within the office of Nova Scotia Legal Aid for a client, such as in the circumstances of assault where both individuals are charged with assault of one another, one client (often the one with more charges) will be placed with legal aid, whilst the other client will be provided a certificate that will be used to give them a certain amount of free legal assistance from an accepting lawyer.

Following our typical morning review, we would head to court, which is about a ten-minute drive away from the Dartmouth Nova Scotia Legal Aid office. Once arriving at court, we would pass through security and head towards the courtroom where our matters are scheduled for the day. Once arriving at the courtroom, we call the names of our clients who have not yet been spoken to about the plan for the day, and chat with them about what is going to occur or how they would like to proceed in their current matter. When the courtroom opens, we enter and take our seats in the room. During court, I sat in the public gallery, and while I did not get to enter the court space where the lawyers and judge are present, it can be incredibly informative to have an outside perspective of the court, rather than focusing in with one specific person the entire day. There would be some days that court would proceed on time, and other days where we could be waiting an upwards of half an hour before the first matter of the day would be called. Attending court is very much a waiting game, and while there are many boring moments of sitting and waiting, there are also a lot of interesting and educational circumstances that happen throughout the day.

After attending court for the morning, we would return to the office and prepare letters to send to the clients of which we attended court for that day. In these emails, Mr. Muir would detail what happened in court today (whether there was an adjournment, if pleas were entered, if an individual needed to report to a specific institution, etc.), and provide the client with any upcoming court dates or information that would be needed. After sending off this information, in most cases, we would head to our lunch, or we would continue work at the office. On days when we remained in the office, Mr. Muir and I would review video evidence from his current files. This was one of my favourite parts of practicum, as it provides the chance to understand the circumstances in which crimes are allegedly committed, and to observe the factors that are

present in the video evidence. Often, when viewing the videos, we would observe certain actions that would occur, and we would attempt to find the legality and intentions behind what occurs. Reviewing evidence was something that I had not had previous experience with, and it truly shows just how many details, big or small, go into creating legal arguments based on a certain set of circumstances.

Once we had completed reviewing our files from the morning, we would go for our lunch hour. Following lunch hour, we would repeat the same process as in the morning, but in the afternoon. This meant we would check over client files before heading to court, then we often would meet with our clients for the day at court and get their processes handled in the way they designated.

Doing my practicum for POLI4390 at Nova Scotia Legal Aid in the Dartmouth Criminal Law office under Bruce Muir was a memorable experience for my final year of my undergraduate degree. While this placement may not be as hands-on as other placements for this course may be, there is a lot of learning about the law and court processes that can be done just from observing the daily procedures of a lawyer and the courts. I always left every day of my placement with something new, interesting, or both! Learning about the processes of court, and seeing different timelines of various matters such as adjournment hearings, trials, sentencing, and more has definitely given me an extra step in understanding my future career goals.