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Canadian Mental Health Association

POLI4390: Practicum Placement in Public Policy: NGOs and Government Services

This semester through the POLI4390 practicum course I had the absolute pleasure of being placed with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). Whether it was speaking with Bev and Marg who are the Chief Executive Officers of the CMHA, learning from staff, or spending time with the club members, I was met with so much kindness and passion. I initially enrolled in this course to gain experience and a broader understanding of the services available in my community – and it turned out to be a perfect match. While this opportunity was made possible through school, it has inspired me to think about how I can be involved in providing similar services to others in the future. The CMHA is a national organization dedicated to addressing mental health and supporting those with mental illnesses across the country. Each province has its own division and a number of local branches throughout, as well as a wide variety of programming, activities, services and resources. At the Halifax-Dartmouth location, the primary focus is on providing support to adults experiencing loneliness or other feelings of isolation, and promoting mental wellbeing through social connection.

The two main services that the Halifax-Dartmouth branch provides are the social clubs and the Building Bridges program. During my placement I spent my time at the social clubs, which take place every Tuesday to Friday at the Halifax Office or the Dartmouth Senior Service Centre, from 1:30pm-4:00pm. I visited the Senior Centre every Wednesday afternoon to

participate in a wide range of activities with members of the social clubs. The activities provided each month are very diverse, giving members the chance to take part in programming or communities that they otherwise would not be involved in. Activities range from knitting, tech days, baking, hockey games, swimming, and a long list of others. The CMHA puts in a lot of care and effort to provide the best experience for the club members. There are many interests and abilities among the members, but the staff ensures that everyone is listened to and given the chance to express interest in new activities.

While attending social clubs on Wednesdays, my role was casual and informal, with the expectation to spend time with the members, get to know them, and provide a safe space for vulnerable conversations. At first, it can seem daunting to find your footing at the social clubs, as the members are unfamiliar with you and there is no set structure to your day. The most important thing for me to do was just to be patient and empathetic to the members, giving them reassurance of my support and understanding while leaving them the space to trust me when they were ready. After a few weeks of playing cards or doing crafts with members, it was incredible to see the way they welcomed me into their community. I started to be greeted by members even after only seeing them once a week, and they would continue conversations they remembered from past social clubs. This sense of community is a specialty of the CMHA; it's not only about the services they provide that brings people into these spaces, but the sense of purpose that comes from the members being able to provide to it as well. One Wednesday in March, I sat with a member and his wife for the entire social club as they taught me how to play cribbage, and were extremely patient with my poor math skills. While we played, the members casually opened up to me about their lives, and I was able to provide them reassurance and possible resources.

This is just one example of my experience that not only gave me the chance to be supportive, but a chance to learn from the members, even with something as simple as a card game. As someone who highly values connecting with others and learning through my relationships with them, this placement was a perfect opportunity to expand my horizons and gain hands on knowledge about the work it takes to provide to your community.

As previously mentioned, the Halifax-Dartmouth CMHA prioritizes addressing social isolation and loneliness. With a focus on the social determinants of health, the branch is working to provide proper support to those with the highest risks of isolation; adults living with mental illness. Due to the importance of the programming at the CMHA, when I wasn't attending the social clubs, I spent my hours researching other types of services we could provide. Bev and Marg did not want something overly complicated, but rather an accessible list of program ideas that we could introduce at their branch. Keeping social isolation and loneliness in mind, I was prompted to conduct a local, national and international search of interesting options that could be transferable to their location. I spent many hours looking into what other provinces, cities and towns had successful programs that could be utilized at this branch. I learned about the many different needs and abilities of members across the country, and was impressed at how each branch is committed to addressing and fixing these issues. Although some branches have different end goals, or alternative mechanisms to getting there, each has skills and tools that can be useful to their diverse group of members.

For this research, I spent the bulk of my time looking into other locations across the country to see what types of programming could be useful or shown to the government for a

possibility of further funding. The CMHA runs mainly off grants, or other community fundraising, so it is crucial that every dollar is spent with intent so members are receiving the best services. At first, I was unsure how to structure this report – but Bev and Marg gave me very clear directions about the simplicity of this research and how their main priority was learning about new ways to expand their branch for members. A few of the programs I included were Mood Walks in Ontario, which focus on bringing together communities through nature and recognizing the positive effects that nature has on both our physical and mental wellbeing. Another was a program called Healing through Humour, teaching people how to write comedy and get more comfortable speaking on stage. Not all the recommendations were complicated services yet made significant impacts on their communities.

I have immense gratitude for everyone I interacted with during my practicum and for the overall experience. Dr. Denike mentioned it multiple during class, but I do strongly recommend this practicum as a chance to experience hands on learning and find some inspiration or direction on what you may want to pursue after graduation. It was an ideal mix of stepping into a new environment while keeping a manageable balance with my school workload. I also found Bev and Marg to be extremely understandable and empathetic to the circumstances of participating in the practicum while being in school. They were extremely flexible if a certain day or time did not work, and they both made it very easy to communicate my needs. They gave me the freedom and flexibility to do what worked for me because they trusted and respected me – which motivated me to work even harder and provide greater value to them. The two of them also made it very clear that they enjoy having students work with them as it brings a fresh perspective and allows members to interact with new people. While one of my concerns was possibly feeling like a

burden to my host organization, this was never the case when I was at the social clubs or meeting with Bev and Marg.

A lot of the time while seeking societal reform, we focus on demanding more from governments and criticizing their reluctance to change. I believe one of the largest learning experiences for me at the CMHA was that sometimes in getting caught up in what certain players are not doing, we overlook and fail to support those who are actively making a positive difference. The CMHA was a clear reminder that most people making a real difference in their community are not seeking attention or working in high-profile positions – they are just showing up to work every day with the commitment to improving circumstances through the measures available to them. Bev and Marg work hard day after day without complaints, and you can see the level of impact and care they provide. One day while we had a guest speaker at a social club, he explained how he randomly stumbled into the Halifax CMHA office one afternoon while in the area and proceeded to have “one of the best conversations of his entire life about the importance of social wellbeing and effects of loneliness”. This really stuck with me and reminded me of the importance of interacting with and learning from others in our communities. The CMHA gave me the chance meet and learn from people I might never have encountered otherwise, and despite our differences we had so much in common and gained greatly from the experience.

To conclude my thoughts, I would like to express my appreciation one last time to everyone involved. This experience would not have been possible without Dr. Denike, Bev and Marg, and their commitment to providing students with hands on learning. If anyone reading this

is considering this course and more specifically the CMHA, I could not recommend it enough.

No matter what you are seeking, this course is filled with the opportunity to expand your awareness and understanding of what you have learned in the classroom and apply it in the community.