

POLI 4390 Practicum Placement: Coverdale Justice Society 2026

I completed my practicum placement at Coverdale Justice Society. Coverdale has been in operation since 1923 and today offers support and specialized services to women, youth and gender-diverse individuals interacting with the justice system in Nova Scotia. In 2023, the organization changed its name from Coverdale Courtwork Society to Coverdale Justice Society to reflect its evolving mission to improve access to justice and provide alternatives to traditional justice processes. Coverdale takes an empathetic, respectful, solutions-focused, collaborative, intersectional and client-centric approach to its work, striving to be inclusive of Indigenous and African Nova Scotian women and those with other marginalized identities.

Coverdale now has three distinct branches: Supportive Housing, Restorative Justice, and Community Justice. My placement was with the Community Justice branch, but I interacted with colleagues from across the organization. The Community Justice program supports women and gender diverse individuals in navigating the complexities of the justice system, criminalization, and chronic homelessness. My supervisor was Senna Hollihan, the Prevention Outreach Manager, but I worked more closely with Sam Morris, the Prevention and Diversion Coordinator, and Megan Dunford, the Intensive Case Manager. The entirety of my practicum was spent shadowing Sam and Megan. I usually went in once a week for the whole day, but the team was very flexible and would have happily had me come in multiple times a week for shorter periods.

Much of Sam's time is spent in the jail, where she works with individuals who are currently incarcerated on discharge planning and early intervention strategies. Since I was only working with Coverdale for a couple of months, I did not get clearance to accompany her into the prison, but Sam told me a lot about her meetings with clients and the kinds of supports she

offers to incarcerated individuals. For many clients, she simply provides a safe space to vent or cry without fear. Sam also works with individuals who have been recently released from prison to connect them to community resources and assist them in navigating housing insecurity and ongoing criminal matters. Similarly, Megan works with high-need individuals with current or prior involvement in the criminal justice system to support them in maintaining housing stability, developing life skills, and reducing the risk of further justice involvement. Sam and Megan brought me along as they provided services to various clients, some of whom I met multiple times. Mine was a very hands-on, client-facing role that involved working directly with people accused and convicted of crimes.

On my first day, Sam brought me on a tour of all of Coverdale's offices and housing facilities. Coverdale's main office is located in Dartmouth, quite far out of the city centre, which initially worried me since I did not have access to a car. However, I only ended up busing to the head office on this first day and otherwise worked out of their offices in Halifax. It is important for future students to be aware that they may need to travel to Dartmouth, but that they will likely be able to work primarily in Halifax. Other than the head office, Coverdale has an office for its Restorative Justice program and operates three supportive housing programs: Caitlan's Place, Honour House, and Shannon's Place. Each serves a slightly different demographic, but all are intended for women and gender diverse people navigating the justice system and/or homelessness in Halifax. Sam and I brought a client who had recently moved into Honour House after being released from prison to pick up her medication and go grocery shopping, and we dropped off bus tickets to another client.

Sam and Megan were both sick on my second in-person day, so I spent the day at Caitlan's Place, which offers 15 affordable units to adult women exiting incarceration. I helped

their front-line staff with room checks and cleaning. I also read their clients' files to familiarize myself with the common challenges and experiences of people living in supportive housing. This was very informative, and I was particularly struck by the extent to which some clients are dependent on substances and sex work for survival. I also completed online training on the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) during this week. HIFIS is a coordinated-access system that enables case managers from all community organizations to collect and share client data to ensure individuals and families experiencing homelessness are appropriately prioritized and supported. Staff at Coverdale use HIFIS daily, so this training allowed me to better assist them in their case management work.

Over the next few weeks, I reviewed intake paperwork, inputted by-name list referral forms (BNLs) into HIFIS, and learned about various shelters and resource centres. I accompanied Megan to do things like bring snacks and necessities to a hospitalized client. I also completed Nova Scotia Early Psychosis Intervention training at the Restorative Justice Office. Furthermore, Senna tasked me with creating two spreadsheets for Sam and Megan to use. The first, a weekly client reporting document, would allow Senna to track the services clients are requesting and accessing. The second, a client demographic and housing pattern tracking tool, would help Senna understand patterns, identify gaps in support, and measure housing stability outcomes. Doing this work expanded my familiarity with Excel and required me to think critically about the most efficient and productive ways to collect information. For the most part though, this four-week period was very quiet, and the team did not seem to have much use for me. I spent a lot of time sitting in the office without anything to do, despite offering to help with data entry or document preparation. I had to reach out to Senna via email to ask about additional

work for when Sam and Megan did not need assistance, at which point she gave me the tasks above (which still did not fill all the available time).

My days got busier during the second half of my placement. At this point, Senna had asked Sam and Megan to try to schedule their more interesting jobs while I was shadowing. I got more practice inputting client information into HIFIS and edited different intake and release planning forms for Senna. Megan and I brought food to a client housed in a shelter, returned belongings to a client who had left Shannon's Place, began cleaning out a client's rented room after she was evicted, and brought a client and her partner to their doctor's appointments. During my eighth week, we completed intake for two new clients, one who was facing eviction and one who was searching for housing following eviction by a family member. I also attended intake court for the first time that day with Senna. We went to support a client who was facing multiple charges of failing to comply with a release order, robbery, forcible confinement, assault, choking, and obstruction of a peace officer.

A couple weeks later, Sam and I brought that same client to her probation meeting. I met her probation officer (PO) and sat through the meeting with them, which allowed me to better understand the mechanics of conditional releases. I also observed the importance of criminalized women having an advocate, as the client's PO treated her very differently with Sam around. Sam and I also went to intake court together later in the week, as one of her clients was meant to enter her election and/or plea for charges of failing to comply with a release order, robbery, and motor vehicle theft. Unfortunately, the matter ended up being rescheduled to the following week (and the same thing occurred the following week too).

On my last day, I went back to intake court with Sam as another client was meant to enter her election and/or plea for charges of failing to provide the necessities of life and child

abandonment. She was also seeking a variance court order to change her place of residence as she had been evicted from her previous housing. This was an incredibly emotionally charged matter as her surety could not be present in court to sign the variance (she had been hospitalized following a medical emergency a few days earlier) but, if it was not granted, the client would have had to return to jail. She was distraught by this possibility. I held her and comforted her while she bawled, and Sam made many phone calls to try to find a solution. Ultimately, court ended up going in her favour, but I do not know what her PO's decision was. This was a dramatic end to my placement that exemplified the stakes and meaning of Coverdale's work for their clients. I was so impressed by Sam's composure and commitment to helping a young woman who was truly trying to change her life for the better. The client had a job she loved and was helping to care for her little sister, which exacerbated her fear of being placed in custody.

Overall, my experience at Coverdale brought to life the effects of colonialism, racism, homophobia, poverty, and intergenerational trauma that we discuss so often in class. I would caution future students that in working with Coverdale, you will likely be in direct contact with people with lengthy criminal records, serious mental health conditions, and histories of substance use. You may also be around those substances, especially cannabis and tobacco. That said, at the beginning of my placement, Senna assured me that they would accommodate any triggers or boundaries I had. A placement at Coverdale would be ideal for a student looking to get into social work or wanting front-line case management experience. You are expected to be there in-person and to keep an open mind to the challenges and circumstances of clients of all backgrounds. There were other practicum students with the organization while I was there, and I know at least one student spent most of her time in the Restorative Justice Office, shadowing their caseworkers and taking meeting notes.

For me, my placement at Coverdale confirmed that I do not want to pursue a career in social work, but it was still an invaluable learning opportunity. I have a better understanding now of the lived experience of criminalized women and gender diverse people in Nova Scotia than I did after taking several law and sociology classes. The team at Coverdale is incredibly kind—they invited me to their International Women’s Day brunch and gave me a card on my last day—and there is the potential for students to stay on the organization. I was offered a full-time position as a Restorative Justice Caseworker, though I decided to turn it down in favour of a different opportunity that better aligned with my career goals. Bearing in mind the caveats I have already mentioned, I would highly recommend a placement at Coverdale to anyone passionate about addressing systemic barriers to justice and reducing homelessness and recidivism among marginalized women and gender diverse people in Halifax.