

POLI 4390
Practicum in Public Policy
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This report may be descriptive or analytical: your objective will be to provide a summary and description of the project that you have undertaken and/or the work that you engaged in. This report may then be made available to interested practicum students in the coming 4 years, to enable them to see the range of work and the types of projects completed for this course and/or the nature and scope of the services provided by placement agencies. To facilitate writing this report, you are strongly advised to keep a weekly diary on your activities, which may be compiled, re-written, and submitted at the end of the term. Beyond your own personal touch and discussion of what you learned from this experience, the report needs to clearly specify a) the name and nature of the service or agency; b) the type of work it does, including, for instance, its mandate, mission, campaigns, etc.; and c) the specific project or work that you undertook, and what this entailed. (40%)

My work placement was with the Department of Justice, in the Court Services division. I worked with Alex Keaveny, a Crown Attorney on secondment as Director of the Provincial Court subdivision. I first met with Alex on January 7, 2026, in the Joseph Howe Building on Hollis Street. From that meeting, he described the two spheres of work I would be engaged in over the semester; one longer project I would be working on periodically throughout the term, and consistent observations of different aspects of the Nova Scotia legal system. The Court Services Division provides administrative support for the court system, managing and administering court programs such as the Criminal Code Review Board, the Justice of the

Peace Program, the Domestic Violence Court Program and Wellness Court Programs. As part of my observations, Alex and I worked out a schedule that conformed with my availability around classes, which in some cases did cause issues. For example, the Wellness Court program runs on Thursdays only, in the morning and afternoon, which required me to make arrangements with classmates and professors to ensure I was able to attend. Court programming can be inconsistent, with some cases running longer than I was available, or ending earlier than I expected. This may require extra sessions of court observation in order to fulfill the 77 hour requirement.

The content of the program should be of particular interest to any student considering a career in law. Getting the experience of just watching how Court processes work, leads to a greater appreciation for both the formal and informal processes of the Court. More than just observing how the Court works, which is in itself a valuable experience for anyone considering a career in law, the connections and ability to ask questions of professionals like doctors, lawyers, program managers, case workers and judges, greatly enhances the experience. Observing public hearings and private meetings greatly expanded my understanding of the Court.

My first week, after a brief conversation with Alex, I received a tour of the Provincial Courthouse on Spring Garden Road. Something Alex emphasized often was the open nature of legal cases, that anyone with the right tools was able to observe any ongoing case. The problem, of course, lies with obtaining those tools. This is where the program is most helpful, as it connected me with people open to questions and willing to explain any part of the Court process. This first day, he gave me a tour of the Courthouse, explained the scheme for the building design, including which courtroom served what purpose. The most important aspect for the self-directed observations was joining the court docket mailing list, which gives a daily overview of which cases are happening in which rooms, the names of defendants and

their charges. This is an invaluable resource, as it allowed me to follow cases and audit for particular charges I was interested in. That same night, I returned to the Courthouse to observe the night court. The degree of interest you will have in watching most cases varies, depending largely on the content of the case and connection to the people involved. Night Court handles traffic infractions, making this session one of the more dull ones. The next morning I attended intake Court, where the accused enter pleas, updates in programs like restorative justice are given, and delays are requested. Intake is mostly the everyday meetings of the Court, so while it is difficult to call it exciting, there is a lot about typical court processes that an observant person may learn.

Week 2 was another session observing intake and night court, observing testimony from accused persons and police, along with the typical pleadings and delays. At this point I had begun to settle into a routine of observation, growing more comfortable taking notes. As I was more used to watching court, I became more aware of things that were relatively uncommon, such as Peace Bond applications or mistakes made by accused in questioning ticketing officers at night court. Though court can feel repetitive, this is an unadulterated look into how it works everyday. This gave me a feeling of assurance, making me realize “this is what I’m in for”.

Week 3 I attended Bail Court, a court program dedicated solely to bail issuance. Previously, bail had been handled in intake court, however the longer arguments necessitated a separate venue to efficiently utilize judicial resources. Bail in Canada is granted or denied along a 3-pronged test: where it is "necessary to ensure his or her attendance in court"; where it is "necessary for the protection or safety of the public" or where it is "necessary to maintain confidence in the administration of justice". Arguments arise when both sides cannot reach a joint agreement for sentencing, and will proceed along one or more of these prongs. There is typically agreement between the Crown and defence or Legal Aid, but when there is not the

length of the hearing will depend upon witnesses or evidence presented, ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Week 4 I met briefly with Barry Tanner, a member of the Court Services division focused on the Domestic Violence program. He was very open to questions, and detailed in what the program handled, how it operated and what was expected from me. Later that week, I attended Crownside, a type of chambers meeting between lawyers scheduled before the Supreme Court on Water St. Crownside handles short but important preliminary issues, such as setting dates and other preliminary motions. As this was before the Supreme Court, the issues they handle are more serious, requiring more detail and attention from both the justice and representation. Though shorter, Crownside was more dense with information, meaning I was more likely to miss or not understand the processes or intricacies of the hearing. This is where Alex was so valuable as a resource, as he was very open to questions, delving deep into the system, its quirks and possible implications. He stressed the importance of interrogating what I see and hear constantly, which I believe has helped the way I understood the Court. Friday of that week, I met with Court administrators, observing as they assisted people pursuing criminal charges, protective orders, tenancy complaints and small claims. This gave me more insight to how the administrative side of how the Courts work through initial complaints, and the person-to-person interaction and empathy necessary to keep the Court working.

Week 5, after a conversation with Alex going over what I had seen and any questions I had, we discussed the Peace Bond project I would be working on, what he expected and some initial sources I could check out. The project revolved around peace bonds (Criminal Code 810), where one person seeks a constraint on the behaviour of another due to the fear of them committing a crime, typically some personal violence. My project focused on 810.03s, a relatively new type of peace bond designed to specifically combat the fear of domestic

violence, and the administrative changes surrounding them. Chiefly, these PBs are handled in their initial hearing by provincial judges, instead of Justices of the Peace who typically handle PBs, administrators or experienced lawyers. I worked in the Joseph Howe Building, next to Alex's office, allowing me to tap him for information if needed.

Week 6 I attended both an online Teams meeting in the morning and an in-person court hearing. Crown, legal aid, defence lawyers and program managers were present, along with the judge. The Teams meeting contained updates on participants, and discussion on the background and suggested findings for those appearing in-person later that day. The program is diversionary, meaning that to join the program an accused has to plead guilty and be assessed as suitable for the program based on the ODERA measurement. This, along with later programs, contain sensitive information, sometimes of minors, requiring confidentiality and discretion. These are highly stressful, emotional situations, which you need to be prepared for. The judge can see everyone in the Courtroom, so maintaining a serious, empathetic demeanour is important. In Court, what you don't write is sometimes as important as what you do.

Week 7 I observed virtual meetings of the Criminal Code Review Board (CCRB) made up of counsellors and mental health professionals. The CCRB handles people assessed as being unfit to stand trial (UST) or not criminally responsible (NCR) due to significant mental illness. UST is defined by a person being unable to; understand the nature or object of the proceedings, understand the possible consequences of the proceedings, or communicate with counsel. NCR is proven when a person is incapable of appreciating the nature and quality of the act or omission or of knowing that it was wrong due to mental illness. I observed 3 meetings of this nature, with the same board hearing testimony from professionals treating the person in question. The Board could grant an absolute discharge from the

program, conditional discharge based on conditions outlined by their treating professional, or be detained in hospital until their next hearing.

Week 8 was spent observing the Wellness Court in Dartmouth, with a similar morning meeting/afternoon hearing format. The Wellness court requires a guilty plea to participate, handling cases of significant mental illness not arising to either UST or NCR, and substance use disorder. For participation in the court, there must be a significant nexus between the mental health or substance abuse issue and the crime in question, it cannot be enough that both are merely present. The program only runs on Thursdays, requiring me to make accommodations with classes to attend both meetings, which may be an issue for those in this program in future.

Week 9 was an open Court observation week, where I was able to continue a serious case I had been observing an earlier week. Often when observing, you will be catching only a snippet of a case, and must fill in the context yourself. Having this continuity of observation helped me follow procedural issues that arose and the arguments that surrounded them.

Week 10 I was in the office, finishing my work on the PB project. I submitted my draft to Alex, after which we discussed possible changes or edits. Having an experienced lawyer checking and helping to grow my work was an incredibly valuable experience, I feel as though it shaped my writing in a significant way.

Week 11 I was observing sentencing at the Supreme Court, and a wrap-up meeting with Alex. Discussing intricacies of how the Court system works and relating that to wider conversations of the reasoning behind why it works that way expanded my understanding of the Court system.

This program and this placement in particular is a great idea for any student interested in a legal career. Gaining the internal knowledge of how the system works, general experience in Court, and the connection to professionals working in the field will realistically

prepare you for the Court system. Alex is incredibly knowledgeable and dedicated to organizing interesting opportunities, with a behind-the-scenes look at each of these programs. He was always available to answer questions, and able to provide those answers in a way that is challenging to process, but will expand your understanding in an invaluable manner.