

GWST 4390 Practicum in Public Policy

Nova Scotia Legal Aid - HRM Duty Counsel Office

April 3, 2026

Final Written Report

This semester I did my practicum placement at Nova Scotia Legal Aid HRM Duty Counsel Office. The lawyer I shadowed, Andrew Jamieson, works primarily at the Dartmouth Provincial Courthouse located at 277 Pleasant Street. I attended for one full day a week from 9 am to 4 pm. Duty counsel are Legal Aid lawyers who primarily work in intake court, advising people who do not yet have representation but have a court appearance that day. Duty counsel are not full-service lawyers and do not take on trials. They appear for clients to ask the judge for more time until they can secure a full-service lawyer.

The purpose of Legal Aid is to provide those who cannot afford a lawyer with proper legal representation. It is a government-funded program. Legal Aid helps in areas including family, social justice and criminal law - duty counsel is for criminal law. Nova Scotia Legal Aid states its mission as overcoming barriers to access to justice, including historical inequalities. They acknowledge the importance of individual liberty and rights, as well as the protection of youth and families.

Duty counsel helps people both in and out of custody. They mostly appear on behalf of individuals for their first appearance, but sometimes Andrew took on more work including bail and sentencing hearings, depending on the situation. The primary tasks duty counsel do are adjournments for those who do not have a lawyer, work with Crowns to release those held in cells, and release order variations. For those who do not have a lawyer, yet it is because they have either applied for Legal Aid but have not yet been assigned representation, or they have not

yet applied. For those who have not been assigned yet, Andrew will call the Legal Aid office and ask for an update on the person's applications and find out the date they will be assigned so he knows how much time the appearance will need to be adjourned for. If someone has not applied to legal aid yet he will fill out an application for them, then ask the court for an adjournment.

For those held in cells, duty counsel's primary goal is to have them released as soon as possible, with the least restrictive release conditions possible. To do this, Andrew asks the individual about their situation. This could include questions such as what their current release conditions are, or how restrictive of terms they are willing to take on, such as getting a surety or pledging money. He also asks the Crown what their position on the matter is and negotiates with them to create a new release plan for the person. Before appearing in court, duty counsel and the Crown will often have a joint recommendation to present to the judge, and in most cases the judge accepts that position.

Each day I attended, I shadowed the same lawyer, and a lot of workers in the courthouse became familiar to me as well, including other lawyers, judges, sheriffs, and courtroom support workers. Andrew is comfortable having students shadow him and does an excellent job of explaining things to me and introducing me to other workers in the courthouse.

This placement works best for students who can dedicate one full weekday a week to going to the courthouse because the commute is relatively long, and this way you can see how different matters proceed over the day. That being said, Andrew is flexible and was very willing to work with me to make sure I was getting in my hours while working around my busy schedule. I usually went on Mondays, but there were a couple days where I could not make it on Mondays so I would make up those days on a Wednesday, and one day I did assigned readings from home instead.

I did not take on a project this semester but rather spent my time shadowing and speaking with Andrew. This is a great placement to learn about the inner workings of a courthouse and allowed me to apply concepts I had learned about throughout my degree to real-world situations including access to justice, crimes of poverty, and recidivism. I enjoyed meeting different people and listening to their stories. Although most of the people we met were suffering financial hardship since they are being represented by Legal Aid, I met people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds.

Overall, this placement deepened my understanding of how access to justice operates in practice, particularly for individuals navigating poverty and systemic barriers. I would strongly recommend this placement to students interested in criminal law and the practical functioning of the justice system.