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Dalhousie Legal Aid Service Practicum Report

I completed my practicum placement at Dalhousie Legal Aid Services (DLAS) under the supervision of Dr. Hannah Main, Eviction Prevention Coordinator. My work involved legal and policy research, project coordination, office-based support, and client-facing tasks. This placement gave me the opportunity to learn more about community-based legal work in Nova Scotia and to contribute to a public education project focused on housing rights for people with disabilities. Over the course of the semester, I developed a much stronger understanding of the role legal aid can play in both direct service and broader public education. This report outlines the nature of DLAS as an agency, the work it does, the specific project I undertook, and the main things I learned from the experience.

DLAS is a community-based legal office that provides legal support to low-income and marginalized communities in Nova Scotia. Located in the north-central area of Halifax, it is operated by Dalhousie University's Schulich School of Law and is the oldest clinical law program in Canada for law students. DLAS began in 1970 as a summer project through the former Halifax Neighbourhood Centre. It was the first legal service for low-income communities in Nova Scotia and remains the only community law clinic in the province.

DLAS provides support in several legal areas, including family law, child protection, youth criminal matters, residential tenancies, and administrative law issues related to income and housing. Its mandate is threefold. First, it provides legal aid services to people who would otherwise be unable to obtain legal advice or assistance. Second, it conducts research, provides information, makes recommendations, and engages in programs related to legal aid and law reform in Nova Scotia. Third, it provides an educational experience for Dalhousie law students

by allowing them to learn through direct engagement with legal problems and community-based work.

The clinic is staffed by lawyers, community legal workers, legal assistants, and support staff, and each term it also hosts law students and occasionally social work students. The clinic's long-standing commitment to legal access, public service, and community engagement was immediately evident to me in the work atmosphere. One of the first things I learned was that legal environments were not as intimidating as I had imagined. Before starting at DLAS, I held assumptions that all legal spaces would feel overly formal, strict, or difficult to navigate. Instead, the workplace was collaborative, community-oriented, and filled with people who were passionate about their work and cared about the people they were helping. As a practicum student, I felt welcomed by the front desk staff, lawyers, community legal workers, and law students.

Over winter break, I met with my supervisor to discuss my placement and the main project I would be working on, which helped set expectations and gave me a sense of direction going into the semester. Early in the term, I attended a welcome seminar with the law students who are, as part of their training for their clinical placement, required to attend legal skills seminars. I was allowed to attend them as well; unfortunately, most of the sessions that worked with my schedule were cancelled. I was able to sit in on one online session about the key concepts of residential tenancies, which gave me useful background for the housing project.

My placement was structured as one in-person day each week, generally from 11:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., although I sometimes stayed later, of my own volition, depending on what needed to be done. There was flexibility to work virtually when weather conditions were poor or if

someone was unwell. It was clear that the executive director, Megan Longley, genuinely prioritized the well-being of everyone in the office. I found the in-person environment especially valuable because it made it easier to ask questions and allowed me to observe how an office functioned. I had the chance to see how law students handled files, how staff worked together, and how client issues moved through the clinic.

Overall, my placement combined direct exposure to legal aid work with responsibility for a public legal education project, a housing rights planner for tenants with disabilities in Nova Scotia. My supervisor explained that the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights had received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council SSHRC and the Race and Gender and Diversity Initiative (RGDI) for a project titled *Right to Housing for Tenants with Disabilities in Canada*, and that DLAS had been selected as one of the sub-awardees. DLAS's contribution involved partnering with Nova Scotia-based disabled visual artists to create a housing rights calendar. By the time I joined the placement, because of timing and production considerations, the calendar had evolved into a daily planner. The purpose of the project was to combine artwork with accessible legal information about housing rights for people with disabilities. It was meant to be both visually engaging and practically useful, while also building community connections among disability rights groups, housing advocates, and artists.

This project quickly became the core of my practicum. I worked on it every week and was involved in several different stages of its development. At the beginning, I helped organize information from an artist recruitment survey by entering results into an Excel spreadsheet and researching applicants online to locate their social media profiles. This was a relatively administrative task, but it helped establish the foundation for artist outreach and selection. Soon after, my work shifted into research and content development. One of my main assignments was

preparing a research memo on a landlord's duty to accommodate disabilities in Nova Scotia. This involved looking into legislation and prior case decisions to understand how accommodation is interpreted legally and what responsibilities landlords have. I also researched related material for the planner, including information on residential tenancies, right to housing for people with disabilities, the Nova Scotia Human Rights Remedy, human rights protections, disability support programs, housing supports, and related resources. Over time, this research became a much larger body of work than I initially expected and developed into a substantial written document.

Another large part of my work involved communication and coordination. I drafted and sent emails to artist participants, tracked responses, followed up with people, answered questions, and relayed relevant updates to my supervisor. I also contacted Advocate Printing Services, a company I suggested for the planner, requested a quote, and later attended a meeting with a representative and my supervisor to discuss production. These tasks helped me improve my ability to manage logistics, communicate clearly with a wide range of people, and keep a project moving when many pieces depend on each other.

In addition to research and coordination, I was also responsible for design work. I created a draft version of the planner in Canva and continued building it throughout the semester by adding artwork, planner pages, and legal information based on my research. I did not expect to play a part in designing the booklet. I created a draft based on considerations of accessibility, readability, and making sure the final resource would actually be usable by the people it was intended to serve.

Alongside the planner project, I also had several opportunities to observe or participate in other aspects of DLAS's work. On a few occasions, I assisted with intake for DLAS's Social

Justice Clinic, a free telephone and walk-in information service for people dealing with housing and income security issues. I helped clients fill out intake forms, photocopied any documents, and had the opportunity to sit in on meetings. These experiences gave me direct exposure to the client-facing side of the office. One particularly interesting experience was observing a Residential Tenancies hearing for a client I had helped admit to the clinic. Before the hearing, I was able to see how preparation happened, from reviewing facts and evidence to going over direct examination. I also took notes during the hearing, which were included in official legal documents. Although I cannot discuss case details, it was such a valuable learning experience to see not only how these matters are handled in a legal setting, but to contribute, even minimally, to a real case.

A valuable part of the placement was being invited by a staff lawyer to attend the youth court with the law students. I had never observed youth court before, so it gave me a new perspective on how the justice system operates for young people. It was also inspiring to watch the law students represent their clients and confidently speak before the judge. Another especially impactful moment came later in the term when I visited the home of one of the artist participants with my supervisor in order to photograph his work. That visit made the housing inequalities I had been researching feel immediate and concrete in a way that classroom learning alone had not. Seeing community housing conditions firsthand and hearing more about the realities people are dealing with deepened my understanding of the structural barriers faced by many Nova Scotians with disabilities. It also reminded me why projects like the planner matter. Public legal education can seem abstract or unimpactful on paper, but when it is connected to the actual conditions people are living in, it becomes much more urgent.

I also developed stronger communication skills, especially around accessibility. Through both client interaction and the planner project, I became more aware of how important it is to avoid legal or academic jargon and communicate in ways that are actually effective to the audience you are trying to reach. This was especially significant to me because it connected directly to things I have studied, including disability, human rights, and models of accessibility. It was rewarding to see that the knowledge I had built in school could actually be applied to real problems and real projects.

Although this practicum was meaningful and gave me valuable exposure to community-based legal work, there were also challenges. Firstly, I was somewhat overwhelmed with the level of responsibility attached to the project. At the outset, I expected to contribute to the project in sections alongside my supervisor. Instead, I ended up developing much of it independently. While I appreciated being trusted with meaningful work, I often felt underqualified for the scope of what I had been assigned. By the end of the placement, I had completed extensive research, taken on participant communication, helped coordinate printing and launch planning, and designed the planner in Canva. This was valuable experience, but it also exceeded what I initially understood my role to be. At times, I felt less like a practicum student being guided through a learning experience and more like an assistant managing project logistics like payment and printing services and answering participant questions, often taking personal phone calls and emails outside of the office. This was especially difficult as the project evolved and participants had more questions.

For future placements, I think practicum students at DLAS should ideally work under the same supervisor, because it was sometimes difficult to tell whether the workload was appropriate for a practicum student or just felt like a lot in proportion to the other students'. While I was

assigned a large, ongoing project, the other students' workload appeared narrower with fewer expectations. Having one supervisor would hopefully create a more even division of labour and make it easier to coordinate tasks, expectations, and project support.

While I had indicated that the other student was willing to help me with this project, that did not occur. Upon reflection, I should have made it clearer that I needed support. One of the clearest lessons I take from working on this project is the importance of asking for help and clarification early. I sometimes hesitated because I did not want to look inexperienced, but I have learned that asking questions is better than losing time or confidence by staying uncertain.

Ultimately, this practicum was a fantastic opportunity and a good experience. I came away with a deeper understanding of housing inequality in Nova Scotia and of the role legal and advocacy organizations can play in responding to it. It showed me how legal work not only functions through formal proceedings or courtrooms but can also be effective through resource development, working collaboratively with communities, and helping make rights more understandable and accessible to the people who need them most.