Report on Practicum Placement - Community Services & Youth Court

By Whitney Larsen, August 2004

1. Introduction

The John Howard Society is a non-profit community agency with a mission to "Bridge the gap between the correctional system and the community". The agency's mandate is to, "Work for effective and humane criminal justice through reform, advocacy, direct service and public education in order to promote a safe and peaceful community." The agency creates partnerships with the government and community to offer a broad range of criminal justice related programs for adults and youths. The John Howard Society is a national organization with provincial and regional offices that work independently from one another, however, who operate in accordance to the Society's core values and agency mandate.

The John Howard Society helps by assisting individuals with advocacy, pre-release planning, support while on release, support and referrals for families, and outreach to all persons in need. The agency offers: federal services, which include federal halfway houses. These houses support people making the transition from prison to the community; Youth Services offers programs at the Vancouver Robson Square Youth Court. The youth court program supports young people and their families during their involvement with the justice system. Youth services also provide victim offender mediation based on a restorative justice philosophy. Adult services offer community services and prison services. The objective of adult services is to provide a supportive network for all persons involved with the criminal justice system that will encourage successful community living. The goal of Educational Services is to educate the public about the criminal justice system by setting up public speaking engagements, the circulation of informative

community newsletters, and by coordinating the 'Choices' program. 'Choices' schedules public speaking engagements. Former offenders volunteer their time to speak to groups of youth, in schools, and in detention centers. They explain the choices that they made in their lives and the consequences that they have faced as a result of their choices. The John Howard Society of the Lower Mainland also offers forensic services. The Vancouver Apartments is run by the JHS and is a home for individuals with limited mental capabilities, mental illness and/ or disabilities. Lastly, the Vancouver office offers a Prostitution Offender Program. This program uses an educational approach and an alternative sentencing approach for first time offenders who have been caught, "Communicating with Women for the Purpose of Prostitution".

2. Duties and Responsibilities

My job with the agency was split between two areas, the community services program and the youth court program. I spent four days a week at the head office working in community services and spent one day per week downtown at the B.C. Robson Square courthouse.

Community Services

The purpose of my time working with community services was to provide a support network for all persons involved with the Criminal Justice System through information, advocacy and referral services. My responsibility to the community services department was to provide individuals with support and resources that would enable them to make positive, pro-social decisions, thus affording them the opportunity to become contributing members of the community.

Resource Centre

One of the main goals of my placement with the John Howard Society was to create a resource center that could be used by agency employees, volunteers, and clients. It was important for me to learn about the agency's mandate in order to create a resource center that could satisfy the clients' needs.

Firstly, I met with my supervisor to identify the areas of need. After our meeting I created an outline for the manuals that I would create. The subject areas that I covered included; Criminal records, emergency resources, accommodation, identification, income assistance, legal resources, substance abuse, support and counseling, health issues, education and training, employment, family and youth resources, and first nations resources. I would create a comprehensive manual for each of these subject areas that could be located in the community services resource centre.

I completed extensive research in order to create these comprehensive resources. The information that I found came from Canadian government websites, the internet, from community centers, from the Vancouver police, from lawyers, from meetings with other agency employees, from appointments with social service providers in the Vancouver area, from many phone calls, and from email correspondence. *Please see Appendix A*

Inquiries

A large part of my time in community services was devoted to client inquiries. Inquiries are made by phone, letters, and/or office appointments. Criminal records, emergency resources, accommodation, identification, income assistance, legal resources, substance abuse, support and counseling, health issues, education and training, employment, family and youth resources, and first nations' resources are amongst the subject areas that inquiries are most frequently made.

Once the questions are asked, it was my duty to compile appropriate research that could address and respond to the inquiries. *Please see Appendix B.*

Presentations

Public speaking is a part of the educational services that the John Howard Society provides to the community. Speakers are provided to any group who wish to learn about the "system" and/ or about the Society. Speaking engagements are solicited among service and public interest groups. Part of my position with the agency was to prepare and deliver presentations at a community college, and to a youth agency in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. In addition to these formal presentations, I also visited professionals at federal and provincial government agency offices to conduct and compile research.

Team Meetings

Another expectation of my position was to partake in agency meetings. These meetings took place once a month. Meetings would follow a prepared guideline and would require me to take notes on the on-going goals and objectives of the agency as well as require me to present the work that I was completing at the time. The team meetings required close attention, a sensitivity and awareness to the agency's objectives, and an understanding of team and employee dynamics. In addition to the team meetings were monthly and the semi-annual newsletters. These newsletters are prepared to keep members, friends, employees, and clients informed about field issues and concerns. One of my responsibilities was to provide material and articles that could be included in these newsletters. In the case of the semi-annual newsletter I had another community agency that community services often used as a referral agency to clients, create an article that we included in the newsletter explaining their agency mandate. The purpose of this article was to provide exposure to this referral agency and to illustrate the types of relationships that can be

created between agencies that will ultimately be more helpful and supportive to both clients and employees. I also wrote an article to be included in the semi-annual newsletter about my coop work term with the agency. *Please see Appendix C.*

I also had the opportunity to attend a Mental Health court seminar concerning the pros and cons of a mental health court. I found this to be an incredible learning experience for me to attend a professional seminar and to listen to a variety of professional speakers and perspectives. I learned about various approaches to societal concerns and it provided me with exposure to a professional forum and issue areas at large within the Criminal Justice System. *Please See Appendix D.*

Youth Court

The purpose of my time at youth court was to provide assistance to youth, and to the families of youth, who are involved in the Criminal Justice System. This included providing support, guidance, advocacy, and referrals to both offenders and the families involved. Some of the actions that I performed varied from providing direction to the legal aid and the duty council offices, to making calls to probation officers and youth workers for the children in holding cells, to providing support to youths who were nervous about making an initial appearance or who were being sentenced in court. It was my responsibility to approach individuals or potential clients outside the courtrooms and/ or inside the courtrooms to assist them to identify problems and facilitate creative, effective, and responsible problem solving. Another responsibility of the position was to visit youth in holding cells to offer support and explain legal rights and responsibilities. And finally at the end of the day at youth court I maintained confidential case files and completed statistics.

3. Work Term Learning Objectives

Technical Skills

Some technical skills that I worked on during my work term were on memo and letter writing. Before my work term I had limited experience with professional writing. While on my work term I wrote numerous letters to clients and emails to private and government agencies. After more than three months of completing my daily responsibilities I had gained considerable exposure and experience to professional and strategic writing.

Interpersonal Skills

Although I have always considered interpersonal skills to be a strength of mine, I wanted to develop my teamwork skills. In past experiences supervisors have often intimidated me because of my fear of not meeting their expectations. Therefore, a primary goal that I created at the beginning of my work term was to break down barriers between myself and my supervisor(s) and other employees. Through my work with the John Howard Society I was able to work closely with my supervisor and to become open to work in partnership with her and other employees on ideas and projects in order to collaborate, complete and fulfill my responsibilities with the agency.

Professional Skills Specific

One area that I really wanted to improve upon during my work placement was public speaking, including presentation skills and further developing my professional phone manner. During my work time I was able to prepare and deliver two presentations, one at a college and one at a community centre. In addition to these presentations I was able to make appointments at government offices to discuss questions about various resources available and services provided to the community. Furthermore, the team meetings allowed me to speak and collaborate with my

co-workers as well as provided me with the opportunity to become more comfortable and to gain more confidence in my ability to present in front of co-workers and supervisors. These speaking engagements provided me with more experience with public speaking, allowed me to break down some of my personal fears, and ultimately helped to gain a more professional disposition.

Career Goals Related to the Work Term

At the beginning of my work term I created two goals with respect to my job description. These goals related to career areas and long-term career goals that I wanted to learn more about during the course of my work term.

The first area that I wanted to learn about was social services and public administration. Because of my front-line work experience with clients and as a result of the research that I conducted to answer inquiries and to create the community resources manuals, I was able to correspond with many government agencies. I interacted with many government and private agencies, including; Vital Statistics, Department of Homeland Security (U.S.), Customs and Revenue Canada, Social Assistance, National Parole Board, Corrections Canada, MSP and ICBC. In turn I was able to learn about the working relationships, or lack there of, and functions of government agencies and departments. I learned about seemingly simple things, from getting a birth certificate (not so simple to obtain) from Vital Statistics, to the criminal record pardon process run by the National Parole Board. Overall, I took in the most information from public administration and Canadian government agencies.

The second area that I wanted to learn about was Canadian law. My placement at youth court taught me about court etiquette and furthermore, provided me with the opportunity to work with clients going through the justice system. Through my interaction with the clients I was able to sit in on trials and learn about court proceedings, legal aid, the crown, defense council, and about

the sentencing process. Overall I gained a great deal of knowledge and invaluable experience as a consequence of my exposure to the youth criminal justice system at the Youth Courts in downtown Vancouver.

Finally, the last area that I wanted to learn more about was policy development. My position with the John Howard Society provided me with front-line exposure to the workings of the Canadian government and its affiliated agencies. Although I did not learn specifics about policy formation, I did work with clients and gained personal experience with what I perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian private and government agencies.

In turn, I believe that I met and even surpassed many of my work placement goals. I believe that I went beyond my personal expectations because I recognized my passion for social work and for Canadian law. In addition to my learning objectives, I also gained more drive to pursue a career in youth criminal law.

4. Personal Learning

Some of the personal learning that I experienced during my work placement dealt with life skills. Through my client interaction I learned a lot about relationships building, the creation of boundaries, and about redefining success.

While I worked with many different clients on a daily basis throughout my work term, there were a few clients that I worked steadily with throughout my entire placement with the Society. It was important for me to not pass judgments or to impose my personal values upon these individuals. While I developed relationships with the clients I had to keep in mind that these were “working” relationships. I learned a lot about creating boundaries with my clients. It was

important to not lose sight of the fact that many of the clients had led lives extremely different from my own, and did not necessarily hold similar values as myself.

Acknowledging these types of differences amongst the clients was a little difficult for me. I found it challenging to accept that someone I could interact with and help one day could be committing theft or doing drugs the next day.

Another area where I experienced personal growth was about the definition of success or what my supervisor refers to as "redefining success". What I consider to be an accomplishment is very different from how a client might define a personal success. While many clients have led a life of crime, kicking a drug habit, writing a resume, or gaining contact with a family member after years of separation could be recognized as a major personal success.

Overall, I found this personal interaction and personal learning to be amongst the most challenging aspects of my position with the John Howard Society. Another thing that I identified during my work term was that the working world not only includes duties and responsibilities to an employer, it also includes considerable interaction that requires well-developed communication skills and a knowledge of and sometimes a distinction between client, personal and working relationships**.**

5. Feedback to my Employer

My overall sentiment on the coop work term is extremely positive. My duties and role with the agency was clearly outlined during the first couple of weeks with the agency. I think that my supervisor did an outstanding job taking the time to work with me on creating goals and objectives for my placement, and for taking the time to support me on any concerns or questions that I had about my responsibilities. This was particularly evident while I was trying to balance my term's on-going project of re-creating the Community Services resource centre with the on-

going departmental inquiries. Although most of my work was completed independently I appreciated that my supervisor and other employees were near by to support, assist, and direct me in any way that they could.

Because a large portion of my work was completed through independent and self-directed work, I felt that it was a good idea to meet with my supervisor to outline goals and objectives, and current projects. In future situations with co-op or practicum students I would recommend taking half an hour or less one time per week to have a meeting between yourself and the student. I think that this would provide an opportunity to touch base and would help to keep the employee on top of his/ or her work and to provide more insight for the supervisor into the employee's daily activities. In addition, I feel that input and feedback is an important exchange that should take place between the employer and employee in order to ensure that everyone is clear, focused and on track to meet and achieve the goals and objectives outlined for the work placement.

6. Recommendations to Future Students

The two biggest recommendations that I can make to future students working employed in my workplace, or in similar organizations would be to take the time to learn about the agency's mandate and don't be afraid to ask questions.

The first couple of weeks are particularly tiring because of the amount of knowledge that you will be taking in. I found it to be incredibly helpful to take the time to learn about the employer, in my case about the John Howard Society. It is important to understand whom you are working for, the main objectives and/ or purpose of the employer, and in the case of a non-profit organization, the agency's mandate. This helps to clarify your work term position and could help you to create learning objectives that are in-line with your job description.

Secondly, don't be afraid to ask questions. Often times it is easy to attempt to impress or to become intimidated by your supervisor. Once this occurs we tend to forget or disregard our questions. It has been my experience that supervisors understand that there is a lot to learn once you begin a work term. Questions are expected. Other agency employees and your supervisor are extremely valuable resources during your employment. They possess valuable experience with the employer, and are generally happy to provide assistance. During my work placement I took advantage of my close working relationship with my supervisor and other agency employees. In turn, so long as you are being respectful of other employees' responsibilities and time commitments, go ahead and ask any and all of those questions!