

Supporting Justice in the Downtown Eastside:

My Co-op Experience at the Atira Legal Advocacy Program

By Emily Zarychta

Date: April 14, 2019

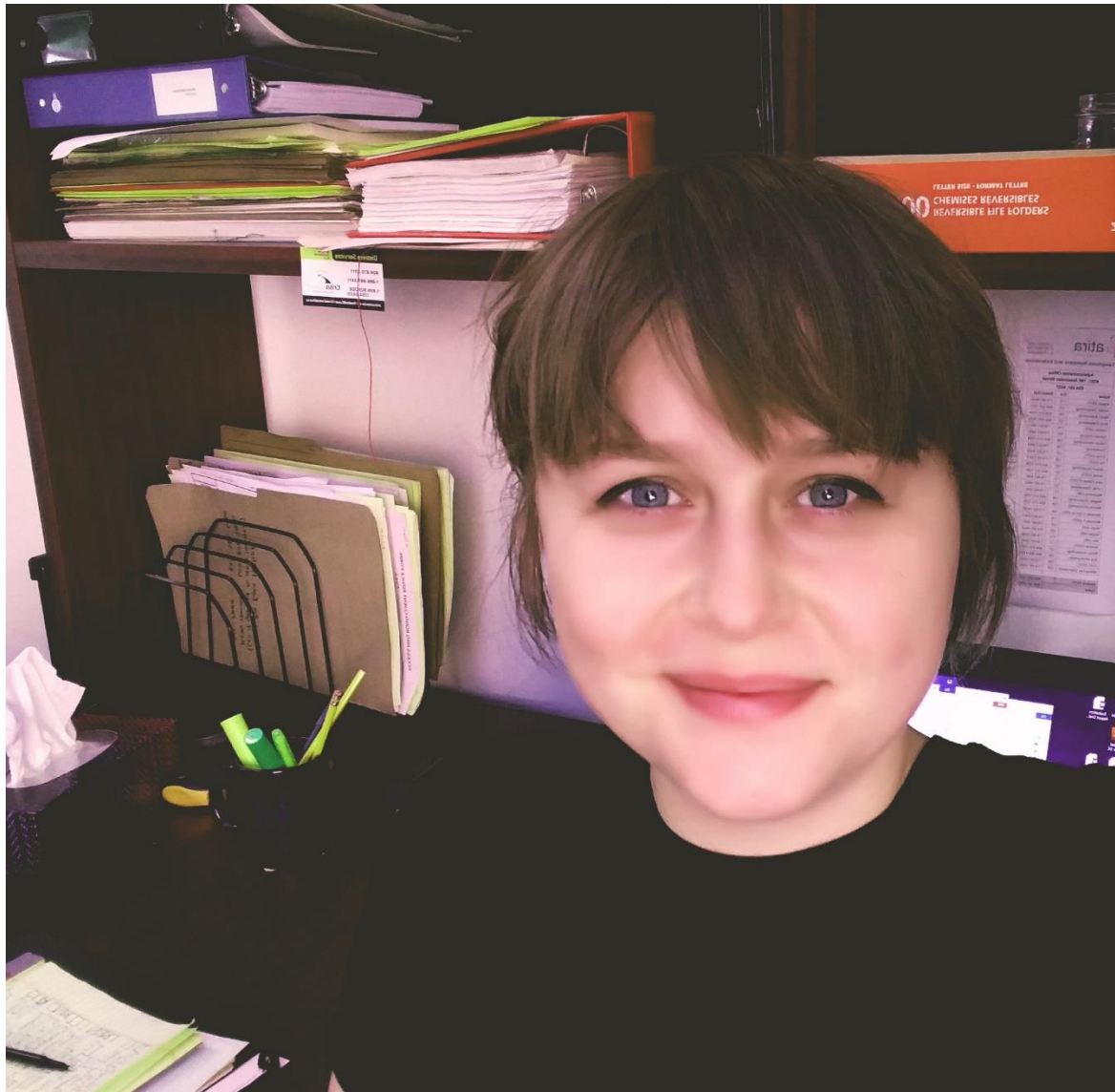


Photo by Emily Zarychta, April 24, 2019

I am currently a co-op student in the University of Victoria Law program, and I was fortunate enough to be hired as a Student Legal Advocate for a 16-week work term at the Atira Legal Advocacy Program. My position was a part of the Public Interest Work Placement Program which is funded by the Law Foundation of BC. So in early January of 2019, I packed two backpacks, grabbed my bicycle, and

took the ferry over to Vancouver to begin this exciting opportunity. After a brief orientation, I was thrown into my position, where I “learnt how the sausage was made,” as my supervisor and mentor Amber Prince said.

Working at Atira was a dream of mine. I really identified with the ethos of ending violence against women and children and applying an understanding of the intersectionality of oppressions. As someone with lived experience, I appreciate that Atira values this and considers it an asset. My previous experience as a crisis counsellor aided me in working from a trauma-informed and judgement-free approach in my day-to-day practice. I really enjoyed researching different options for women, then presenting these options to women for them to decide their path. It is an empowerment-based approach which assumes that women are the masters of their own lives. It gives women the space to express their agency, which is often denied to them in many other contexts and interactions.

My experience as a Student Advocate was equally meaningful and challenging. I learnt more in 16 weeks than I thought was possible. My overall substantive understanding of the law greatly expanded due to exposure to the wide variety of issues that women were dealing with. I gained familiarity in basic family, tenancy, civil, human rights, administrative, and other types of law. I now understand the critical importance of the principles of fairness and transparency for different forms of administrative decision-making, because I have seen the deep impact it can have on women when decisions lack fairness and transparency. In a normal day as a student advocate, I could help someone fill out legal forms in the Civil Resolution Tribunal application process, liaise with multiple parties about a fire order, or gather evidence for a residential tenancy hearing. One of the reasons I loved this job was the variety and breadth of issues and tasks.

Working on intake, doing statistics and managing files gave me a good understanding of all the background work that is required to run a non-profit legal program. Through tasks like intake, I developed skills in interviewing clients, identifying legal issues within a set of facts, and connecting that legal issue to the appropriate referral. I was also able to shadow lawyers at different hearings, and I drafted and edited different legal documents, even writing my own affidavit! I also conducted in depth legal research and compiled legal memos to present different options to my supervising lawyer and the client. The guidance and feedback from my supervisor, Amber, really helped open my mind that there are always three different options: litigation, negotiation, or doing nothing and waiting. This really helped inform how I created legal memos and articulate the available legal options for a given set of facts.

On a practical note, I developed my legal research and writing skills in this position. I gained a lot of confidence in my ability to conduct relevant and useful legal research and in summarizing it both in written form and verbal form. I wrote a document on the law surrounding hoarding, which Atira intends to publish. In creating this document, I researched social science materials, residential tenancy decisions, BCSC decisions, and BCCA decisions, and I compiled this research into an accessible document. I hope that this document will be useful to anyone facing the challenging tenancy and fire department issues that can arise with people who suffer from hoarding.

My experience at Atira opened my eyes to see law in places I wasn't able to before. For example, a newspaper headline about a woman getting kicked out of a grocery store for not packing her groceries quickly enough due to a disability now makes me think about the duty to accommodate and a potential human rights complaint; the lack of appeal rights in a bylaw now makes me think of an

ombudsperson complaint or a judicial review; and an unconscionable car loan now makes me think of a Vehicle Sales Authority investigation or an unconscionable contract. This placement really helped change the way I think about law, and its applicability to the 'real world.'

I admit that prior to this position, I had an overwhelming feeling of imposter syndrome in law school. I felt like everyone else was getting something that I wasn't, and that I didn't truly belong in law school. As a Student Advocate, I was able to interact with the women that we helped, and I was able to see my work come to fruition in a real and practical manner, which had a real impact in women's lives. In terms of personal growth, Amber's feedback and guidance and my work as a Student Advocacy really helped me feel like I do belong in law and that I am fully capable of this type of work.

The most challenging thing about this position was not hearing the tragic stories of injustice, but our lack of capacity to address them all. The Legal Advocacy Program's mandate is to serve self-identifying women in the Downtown Eastside, but women would call for help from all over Vancouver – and even all over BC. There are some stressful situations where women approach us for help with very short deadlines. Even of the women that fit the mandate, there were times when women were turned away because there just was not enough lawyers or appointment slots. The current access to justice crisis and insufficient legal aid means that there are more women that need legal help than are able to access it. The Legal Advocacy Program is no exception. I think programs like this should be expanded, not only because they provide a valuable learning opportunity, but to address the access to justice crisis. Access to justice can seem like a vague and lofty goal, but at the Atira Legal Advocacy Program, I saw what it really meant: fewer evictions, fairer child support orders or settlements, greater income security, more 60's Scoop Settlement forms being submitted, and much more.

In summation, this position was not only an excellent educational opportunity, but it contextualized my education and the law itself within the realities that these women face. The law is only as good as it enforceable. Places like the Atira Legal Advocacy Program are some women's last hope at having their legal rights enforced. Without it, many women would have no practical or real access to their rights. I believe in the work that is done at this program, and I think that Atira's Legal Advocacy Program should be expanded to include another staff lawyer and an administrative/intake position to help the program continue to grow and thrive!