My time at HIPS was one of the most inspirational and rewarding experiences of my life. The people I met and the things I learned have deeply impacted me and continue to influence my ideas and actions. It was easy to transition into HIPS' culture, since everyone is so welcoming and thinks about social justice in a holistic, inclusive, and anti-oppressive way. People at HIPS are very aware of the impact that poverty, racism, heteronormativity, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, language barriers, citizenship status, and HIV status have on our clients' and staff members’ lives. I felt like an integral part of the organization in my short time there and did not want to leave by the end.

On my first day, I participated in a volunteer training. We were introduced to HIPS’ mission (assisting sex workers of all genders in leading healthy lives), values (client centeredness, harm reduction, non-judgment), and services. We discussed our perceptions of sex work, the implications of and philosophies driving the language used to describe sex for sale (“sex work,” “prostitution,” and “commercial sexual exploitation”), and where HIPS fits into the current choice/force debate. We all read cards describing real client’s experiences and had to position ourselves along a continuum between choice and force. Each person read their card and explained why they stood at a certain point. Each card had a match, but people placed themselves at radically different points with just as much clear and reasonable justification. This activity showed how caught up we can get in definitions, descriptions, and technicalities, and how HIPS steps outside of this deadlock by serving any person in the sex trade—whether they trade sex by
choice, coercion, or circumstance. HIPS emphasizes clients’ health, needs, and goals and works to reduce the harms affecting people engaged in the sex trade.

It was great to work with an organization that isn’t led from the top-down by people with no experience in the sex trade and an agenda to reform the lives of those who are actually affected. HIPS hires and values sex workers as service providers, counselors, and educators as well as service recipients. I spent the 2008 spring semester studying sex work, prostitution policy and rhetoric, so I saw the client centered experience as a missing and valuable link to my education.

While working at HIPS, I was inundated by harm reduction messages and subsequently adopted it as a value of my own. Before starting, I did not know much about drug use, stages of change, and the harm reduction approach to service of drug users. HIPS increased my consciousness of the current challenges facing drug users in the USA and DC, how significant (and how rare) non-judgmental, harm reduction services are to drug users and how effective and essential harm reduction is to public health. Harm reduction is critical to client receptiveness of services. Many of our new clients were surprised when they found out we weren't preaching to them about abstaining from drug use or sex. Clients were much more willing to hear us out once they understood our standpoint and realized that ideology wouldn't get in the way of assisting them towards their self identified goals.

HIPS began S/EX, a syringe distribution and exchange program in the middle of the summer. My supervisor was in charge of initiating and organizing the entire program. I read drug injection user guides, helped research the various harm reduction messages related to drug, hormone, and silicone injection, compiled information packets for syringe exchange volunteer trainings, stocked and labeled S/EX materials for outreach, created advertisements for the new
program, and conducted outreach. Many HIPS clients inject drugs, hormones, or silicone so the program fills a need in the community. In addition, the HIPS van does outreach at night when most syringe exchanges aren't open. I can only hope that HIPS will be able to get safer crack smoking kits back soon. People ask about them every week.

I did van outreach at least once a week. I packed condom bags, gave people juice, water, vitamins and candy, looked up resources for people on the spot, answered the hotline, spoke to people about upcoming programs at HIPS and relevant changes in the city, conducted syringe exchange, and took notes. It was great to meet people where they are and to learn how to explain safer injection and safer sex messages in plain, effective language. Only a small portion of HIPS clients come into the office to receive services. We increase our impact through street outreach. Many people recognize and trust HIPS, and know that we will be out there every week. Some people's faces light up when they see our van. A prostitution free zone was established in early August, so we informed our clients in the office and on outreach about its location, rules, and duration. We also organized a community cleanup in the 5th & K area in response to community garbage complaints and increased crackdowns on people who live and work on the streets in that area. We planted a tree, picked up trash, let condo dwellers know about our support for people who live and work on the street in that area, and called our connections in the mayor's office about the lack of trash cans in an area where people complain about trash not being properly discarded.

I did foot outreach with D.C. Central Kitchen on Tuesdays handing out condom packs, lube, and HIPS hotline cards to people in the Southeastern part of the city. One man that I saw on a regular basis asked me if it is embarrassing to ask people if they would like condoms. I told him no because people need them. If they don’t, they can sell them on the street (especially
magnums or female condoms) or give them to a friend. It was great. I was able to have so many educational conversations (on both ends) about sex, relationships, health, and life – all over breakfast.

At first glance, it may seem arbitrary for a food distribution organization and a condom distribution organization to join forces, but it worked out well and people got used to me coming around. Food and condoms are both expensive and vital for health, and many people exchange sex on an informal or survival basis. Sex work isn't always a career. Some people do it occasionally or for goods or services (drugs, transportation, a place to stay for the night or for a while). By teaming up, we were reaching a different section of the city and a population that may not be "on the stroll" on weekends, but may still trade sex or inject drugs.

In the office I prepared for outreach (by packing condoms, updating the bad date list, printing weekly information flyers), greeted and assisted clients (by waiting with them, making sure they were comfortable, well hydrated, fed, and having fun, getting them requested safer sex supplies and/or information, having conversations about harm reduction, drug use, HIV and STI infection, relationships, etc) and took clients to the clothing closet. I also created advertisements for fundraisers and events, entered outreach data into the computer, and did intern-y things: making copies, filing things, cleaning things, and answering phones. I also always made sure the clients had extra candy.

I was in charge of updating and distributing the Bad Date Sheet to clients and other community organizations. The Bad Date Sheet needs to be widely distributed and available to sex workers at other agencies. It is a great resource for identifying violent members of the community and protecting sex workers from those people. Some organizations received the Bad Date Sheet sporadically. I contacted organizations, visited and volunteered with them, and made
sure to email or send hard copies of the Bad Date Sheet to them as soon as we received new reports. Adele – my partner in crime/Jeff's other, more efficient intern – and I presented to Dinner Program for Homeless Women about HIPS services, the Bad Date Sheet, safer sex. The presentation was a big hit and all of our safer sex supplies, Bad Date Sheets, hotline cards, and flyers were gone by the end. We ended up with five community partner organizations (Transgender Health Empowerment, Calvary Women's Services, Prevention Works, Dinner Program for Homeless Women, and Miriam's Kitchen) that receive Bad Date Sheets and report forms regularly and make them available to their clients. On van outreach, a client pointed to a man who attacked her and was still creeping. We updated the Bad Date Sheets by hand immediately and wrote down his license plate number, a description of his car and appearance, and how he attacked her. We made sure to distribute the updated versions for the rest of the night and let people know that he was out that night.

Before I left, I wanted to hold a free, street smart and sex worker friendly self-defense workshop. It is one thing to report an assault after it happens. It is another to be able to protect oneself effectively if an assault occurs. Self-defense workshops would fit into HIPS’ client centeredness and its mission of helping sex workers lead safer, self determined, and empowered lives. I ran out of time and wasn't able to organize the self-defense workshop. However, I contacted a self-defense organization, informed them of HIPS' mission and connected the them with the new Americorps volunteer. Hopefully, they can establish the workshop and HIPS can incorporate it into their future services.

I also organized a massage and wellness workshop for clients complete with self and partner massage techniques, everyday meditation and de-stress strategies, sparkling cider, fruit and chocolate parfaits, and a great goodie bag. Clients have a lot of stresses in their life, so I
thought a massage and wellness workshop would be a useful time for them to step outside of some worries and learn new ways to relax.

One of my favorite jobs was counseling on the hotline for five weeks. I was able to practice my active listening skills, connect people with relevant resources, and give callers an opportunity to process their situation with feedback and without judgment. My calls ranged from letting people know when the HIPS van is available to counseling and befriending a woman who got busted by six cops in another city for doing erotic massage. I talked to her for several days about the situation and connected her with sex worker friendly legal services. One caller had a phobia of HIV tests. She isn't engaging in many high risk activities and gets tested every year, but a close friend of hers died of AIDS 5 years ago and was shunned. She promised to get tested for HIV every year, but freaks out before the test and fainted last year. Her boyfriend doesn’t understand and tries to change her reaction with logic. We talked for a while and she felt better by just getting it off of her chest. She said she’d bring her calming and optimistic sister to the clinic. I asked her if she had ever considered seeing a therapist who specializes in phobias. She had, but didn’t know if it was a big enough fear. We laughed a little while I was telling her about people on the Maury show with phobias of mustard. If mustard is a valid phobia, so are HIV tests.

I talked to and became friends with another client who was stranded in DC when she first called and had an abusive girlfriend. She suffered a lot of trauma from her relationship, didn't have any other support system, and wasn't mentally, emotionally, or financially ready to reduce or end contact with her girlfriend. She couldn't come to the HIPS office to relax for a while because her girlfriend wanted to follow her. But she did keep calling – sometimes to ask for help for her friends or other people she met – while she continued traveling around the
country with her girlfriend. A man from Boston called and said he wanted to stop prostituting and didn't know who to talk to. I connected him with the Tuned Up program at Cambridge Cares about AIDS for individual counseling. Another woman called one day just as I was leaving work. She recently found out that her son has full blown AIDS. She was very frightened and stressed out because she was the only one taking care of him and didn't feel like the hospital personnel were keeping her fully informed or giving him proper care and attention. I linked her to her county's health department and their resources for people living with HIV/AIDS. They had free anonymous testing, counseling, client advocacy, and case management. Hopefully, the case managers at the health department can help advocate for her and her son and make sure he is receiving adequate care in the hospital. I also suggested that she call to see if they could direct her to supportive resources for family members of people living with HIV/AIDS.

Another man called asking if he had a risk of contracting HIV since he slept with a stripper at a bachelor’s party. He couldn’t remember whether or not he used a condom because he was drunk. He lived in another state so I looked up a family planning clinic in his town that administers free HIV tests. I told him that anytime you have unprotected sex with someone whose status you aren't aware of, you are at risk for contracting HIV. I didn’t get a chance to ask him why he believes strippers are more “high risk” than anyone else, but he did get the information he needed.

I had a very long conversation with a man who wanted to save his ex-girlfriend and was troubled by her drug use and escort work. He wanted her to give up her relationships with the people in her life that he thought were taking advantage of her, go to school, and marry him. He asked about women I’ve encountered in the same situation and how we get them to wake up and change their lives. I listened to him for a long time and let him know that I understand how hard
it can be to see a person you love hurt themselves. I also let him know that his ex is an adult and that people only change when they are ready to. It isn't fair to oneself or realistic to take responsibility for another adult and try to reform their lifestyle. He either had to be ready to live with the way she is now, or be willing to wait until she's ready to make the changes that he sees as ideal and desirable. He also had to know that that day of change may never never arrive. His ex may never want to change in the ways he wants her to. I asked him if he had considered therapy; and posed the possibility of seeing a therapist who doesn't know his ex (his last therapist met with and diagnosed his ex girlfriend as a twenty one year old with the mind of a 12 year old) and can help him focus on himself and work through his feelings about the relationship and the breakup.

I also told him about how HIPS' original goal was to rescue women from the streets. That didn’t work because many people didn’t want to be rescued and we served people of all genders. We don’t have success stories at HIPS. We don’t have a specific outcome in mind for people who access our services and graduate from our programs. Any person who set a personal goal and achieves that goal in a way that they were satisfied with is a success story. Some clients I talked to said HIPS helped them with their self esteem and taught them “how to be a better ho.” Some people say HIPS helped them get away from their pimp and trade sex independently without coercion or outside control. Some say HIPS helped them get a job outside of the sex trade. We don’t measure clients based on any standards or ideals and are willing to assist people with whatever goals they have in mind. Client centeredness and non-judgment are what sets HIPS apart and gains community respect.

It was great to represent the organization and describe what we do, how and why we do it to clients, callers, and donors. At Capitol Pride, we didn't reach clients, but we did reach other
members of the community and informed them about HIPS’ mission and services. It seems so normal to me, but what we do really does surprise a lot of people. It is good to be in both circles where sex work is accepted and normalized and (the real world) where public conversations need to be initiated, curiosities sated, and assumptions debunked. I think going from Hampshire to HIPS has spoiled me in a way. Being around progressive people makes me wonder why the rest of the world hasn’t caught up yet. We’re so hung up about sex. America really needs to get laid and start creating some effective public policy.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to work at HIPS. I definitely learned a lot more about social justice issues. It is very difficult to live comfortably in DC. Food prices are high, rent is insane in metro accessible places. Gentrification was happening right in front of our eyes and displacing many of our clients. People who lived or worked on the street in certain areas were more heavily policed because of complaints from newly relocated residents of luxury-all-in-one condos. Non-residential areas became prostitution free zones (PFZs). PFZs sanctioned police profiling by disallowing people in the area who "may be convening for purposes of prostitution" (up to the police's discretion) to be in groups of two or more. Condoms are used as evidence of prostitution. Condoms as evidence of prostitution discourages and stigmatizes safer sex, and infringes on people's right to protect themselves. The zone pushes people out into the more dangerous, less well-lit, isolated Eastern Avenue area. I also learned more about trans struggles and how many trans people are policed and incarcerated. They're more likely than other populations to be sexually assaulted in prison, in addition to their gender identity and expression not being respected by inmates or prison workers and officials. Trans inmates' genitalia can be confirmed by forcing them to strip to determine which section the inmate should be housed in.

The level of violence endured by our clients in their work and sometimes in their and
their families' personal lives is astounding and often unnoticed. I saw the "war on drugs" wreak havoc on people's lives and families everyday and saw the extent to which the criminalization of drug use undermines risk reduction and HIV prevention efforts. Safer crack smoking kits are considered paraphernalia under DC law and cannot be distributed (although the rate of HIV in DC is 10 times the national average). Syringes are no longer considered paraphernalia, so HIPS can distribute and collect used works; however, clients are only protected insofar as the materials are unused. If the materials have drug residue, citizens can technically be prosecuted for that. Clients who live or cross over into Maryland or Virginia aren't protected as members of the DC Syringe Exchange program. Some of our clients are already encountering police who force them to throw away their needles. Needles are supposed to be returned to syringe exchanges so that they can be disposed of properly at hospitals. They aren't supposed to be thrown away in the trash. And its likely that if anyone finds those needles, the cops won't be at fault--it will be the trans woman and that silly group of people who for some strange reason seem to give a damn about prostitutes.

Grind the Vote, the voter registration party hosted by HIPS, Different Avenues, and Spread Magazine, reminded me of the high level of political disenfranchisement and the low level of political participation of marginalized populations and how we have to mobilize these communities so that they can be a vocal part of the political force instead of being spoken for. Decisions should be made with input from the entire community, not only people in power or more affluent community members.

In the future, I would like to work with marginalized populations doing anti violence work, counseling and advocacy (preferably in a progressive, active community based organization instead of within the government or some other bureaucracy) doing empowerment
work and actively including and following the lead of the people I intend to serve. HIPS was an excellent springboard to my larger career goals. I would love to work there in an official capacity one day. Compared to some people's internship experiences of being the copy making coffee fetcher, I felt important and accountable to the organization. I think HIPS does amazing work. Clients really love the organization and feel like it is home. I felt proud to be a part of an organization that can fulfill people's needs and offer reality conscious, grounded advice and options to people "in the biz." I am incredibly excited to watch HIPS improve and expand its services in the future.

Suggestions for Future Interns:

* Do all of your work to the best of your ability. Be positive about it if you can.
* Observe how things are done and what is needed. Try to fill in a gap.
* Start up and participate in projects. If you have an idea for a project, propose it and--if you get the go ahead--make it happen
* Connect with everyone that flows into the office--the clients, the staff, and the volunteers
* Meet people from other organizations and see how they operate. HIPS needs to continue working with other organizations and keeping those connections strong.
* Get a good look at the city you're living in. Devote a lot of time to the organization, but also branch out and see what the city has to offer. Become active in other groups, make friends, and have fun.
* Learn as much as you can about the issues your organization addresses. Read what they give you and go search for more. Talk to people and try to get new perspectives. Don't assume you know what they believe. If you probe a little, they may surprise you.