Final Report: The CAIR Project

One of my major ongoing tasks was managing the CAIR Project information and funding hotline. This involved checking the voicemail and returning calls to women, interviewing them about their situations, and making funding decisions. I was also responsible for providing referrals when needed, and case-managing the fundraising for some women with larger fees, for whom our organization could not meet the total need alone. Working on the hotline was sometimes very challenging for me because we were experiencing a sharp increase in the number of clients we heard from each week, meaning that I was often running out of money or making very difficult funding choices.

My training as a Hampshire College Counselor Advocate turned out to be helpful in my work on the CAIR Project hotline, even though at first I didn’t think it would be. My role as a CAIR Project hotline advocate was very different from my role as a CA, because in addition to listening supportively, I also had to listen critically to assess the woman’s need and come to a decision about how much we would be able to give. At first I worried that I was being too “soft” as a CAIR Project advocate, but I eventually found that my CA experience helped me to balance working with the bare bones facts of the situation with saying the right things to show women that I cared about and supported them. This was especially important in situations in which I was unable to fund women, and my role was instead to encourage them to explore other means of funding and to call back the following week. These obstacles sometimes force women to give up, so I saw my ability to be supportive and encouraging even when I couldn’t fund a woman as a critical part of my job. One of my tasks over the summer was to help update the hotline
advocate manual, and as part of it, I used my experience to expand the section on providing good emotional support.

Another one of my major tasks this summer was to help the CAIR Project transition to a new online database system. The new system has three parts: a wiki, a database for tracking hotline clients and their providers, and a donor database powered by CiviCRM. I worked with all of these sections—updating the provider database and donor database, and adding information to the wiki. I especially appreciated the opportunity to learn how CiviCRM works, because I expect that I will need to know how to use it in the future.

Because they knew of my interest in fundraising, the CAIR Project also gave me the opportunity to draft their fundraising appeals letters. A board member who is a professional fundraiser walked me through the process and gave great feedback on my drafts, which was very helpful.

Another project that I worked on was helping the CAIR Project come up with a client feedback system. My boss described to me what they hoped to accomplish with the system, and what their concerns were, and I did some research and created a proposal with two options that would meet their needs.

I felt that I came to this internship with strong interpersonal skills and organizational skills that I needed to use daily on the hotline to make it run efficiently. While I think that I developed these skills further over the summer, what I am most pleased with is that I feel I developed better judgment and a stronger ability to make decisions and live with them. When I started working on the hotline, I was terrified that I
would give away money to someone and then need it more a few hours later for someone else. That did happen a few times, but what I learned was to move on and deal with the situation in the moment, and not waste time second-guessing myself or be paralyzed with indecision. I think that I learned a lot about decision-making this summer, which is a skill that will serve me no matter what I do with my life.

When I first began working on the hotline, I was somewhat overwhelmed with how much need there was compared with my very limited budget. It was so hard for me to call a woman back the first time I had to tell her I couldn’t fund her. Over the course of the summer, I found a better sense of balance, where I still cared about each woman’s situation, but could also function and see the bigger picture, and didn’t feel quite so bad when I wasn’t able to help someone.

Early in the summer, I also ran into some difficulties because I was doing a lot of data entry work for the database without really understanding how the whole thing was going to fit together and not understanding my role in putting it up. I cleared this up by checking in with my supervisor, and things became more clear the longer I worked for the CAIR Project. Earlier in the summer, my supervisor sometimes had trouble thinking of enough things for me to do, but by the end of the summer, I was familiar enough with the organization that I could think of things on my own!

I was very grateful that the CAIR Project gave me the opportunity to attend the National Network of Abortion Funds annual summit. The weekend conference, which occurred early on in my internship, was a really great way for me to learn more about the
broader issues in abortion funding and to understand the CAIR Project’s role in a broader political and historical framework. I also learned new skills and practical information, and met a lot of incredible activists from around the country.

My experience working on the hotline also stands out as a very important part of my summer. The opportunity to work with so many women and help them through a rough point was very rewarding and a learning experience for me in so many ways.

In addition, I think that my supervisor worked hard to make sure that I had a meaningful internship experience—bringing me to the NNAF summit, checking in with me to make sure I was doing substantive tasks, and specifically letting me work on projects in my area of interest—so I don’t have much to add here. Because the CAIR Project is so small, nearly all of the tasks I worked on this summer were critically relevant to the organization’s functioning, which was exciting.

My academic background is in the social sciences, and I have focused in youth studies, urban studies, and, more recently, combining these interests to look at nonprofits in urban areas. I don’t know that my academic background specifically prepared me for this internship, but my work with the CLPP program had certainly given me a strong background in an understanding of reproductive justice issues, and I had done enough work around issues of gender and sexuality and agency to be able to make connections between my academic work and the work I did with CAIR. In general, though, I think that it was my extracurricular experience—both working with reproductive justice issues with CLPP and other organizations, and with low-income community organizations in the
past, as well as my training as a Counselor Advocate—that really prepared me for this internship.

My internship with the CAIR Project gave me the opportunity to explore doing direct service work in a field in which I already had some experience. From my work at the CAIR Project, I realized that I cannot see myself in a direct service career, because I think it would burn me out. Fortunately, I think that I am well-suited to a career in fundraising, and my work with CAIR gave me an opportunity to develop skills in this area. I am also very happy to have had the opportunity to learn about issues of abortion funding, and look forward to volunteering at a local abortion fund when I settle somewhere after college.