I interned at Justice Now in Oakland, California – and still wish I were there!

Justice Now is an amazing organization, staffed by dedicated activists, a constant stream of interns and a truly inspiring group of board members inside the two largest U.S. women’s prisons – Central California Women’s Facility and Valley State Prison for Women. I really encourage everyone with an interest in anti-racist work, queer activism, the reproductive rights movement and prison abolition to apply. Justice Now can more than handle the responsibility of ten interns in any given semester; interns really thrive under its internship program. You will be doing almost all the work which the staff does – real, important work towards the goal of helping incredibly strong people inside women’s prisons record human rights violations at the hands of prison staff, get released from prison before dying to spend their last months with family and loved ones, receive parole dates, receive proper medical care, and so much more.

If interning with Justice Now, you will have really fulfilling work, but even more importantly, for a short time you will be able to experience the inner workings of a thoughtful, responsive organization fighting tirelessly for what they believe is just. Justice Now is a prison abolition organization and human rights organization that focuses on people inside women’s prisons. Because of budget cuts, Justice Now’s capabilities have somewhat changed from the past, so I think it is important to specify what work Justice Now currently does. Justice Now has several different focuses, each of the approximately five staff members oversees one area. One of the things I was unclear
about for the first portion of the internship was what interns and staff people in Justice Now could handle if someone inside prison called, and what we could not. Because of limited staffing, Justice Now focuses primarily on compassionate release, a curriculum project that distributes self-help material to people inside, compiling human rights reports and conducting emergency medical advocacy. Compassionate Release is a specific situation in which a person inside prison may be released if they are permanently incapacitated or terminally ill. I worked primarily on the curriculum project, although my heart really belonged to direct service – which I did a lot of as well.

Every intern eventually does some direct service, which usually starts with answering a letter or answering the “prison phone.” The prison phone is a phone in the middle of the office, which only people inside prisons can call. At first, all of the interns were extremely nervous answering the phone because we did not feel we could answer any of the questions the callers had. The first telephone call I took, I was terrified. I had to go back to my supervisor a thousand times to ask her to repeat what to tell the caller. After the first two though, I stopped feeling nervous and actually fell in love with the more personal interactions. I took calls concerning requests for notary services, requests for letters of medical advocacy, requests for copies of important medical records and more. There were quite a few calls from people whose needs we could not address, which was incredibly difficult, but there was always some piece of information or advice to provide in lieu of legal representation.

My personal responsibilities fell under the umbrella of Justice Now’s curriculum Project, the Legal Advocacy and Wellness Project. This project focuses on providing people inside with educational materials on subjects such as Navigating the Medical
System, Filing Appeals, HIV and Hepatitis C and much more. I worked on the Navigating the Medical System Chapter, which was written by someone inside with whom I met consistently during each prison visit. I typed the handwritten chapter, edited the language and made the chapter accessible and concise. One of the frustrating aspects of the internship, which completely falls on my shoulders, is that I was unable to finish as much as I had thought was possible at the beginning of the summer. I had hoped to finish this chapter along with another chapter on Preparing for Parole, but with all of the other work, was unable to find time. I did, however, begin to do research for the “Preparing for Parole” chapter, and in addition to meeting with a prison abolitionist who works with California Coalition for Women Prisoners, I met with two people inside women’s prisons who taught me the most important needs and issues of people facing release within the next 6 months. I am going to attempt, once I become settled in the next semester, to continue working on this chapter from school.

In addition to working on the Legal Advocacy and Wellness Chapter, I helped a couple write a letter of advocacy so they might be able to visit their son in the prison’s hospital. I also wrote a letter of support for the person inside who had written the Navigating the Medical System Chapter, because her parole date was fast approaching. While this was a rewarding task and something I really cared about, it also really opened my eyes to how rare it is for people with life sentences to receive parole dates. When I discussed the upcoming parole board hearing with this person, she said to me “I’m hopeful, but people never get a date their first time.” I asked her if she thought she would get a date the second time and she said “No.” I asked about a third or fourth and she smiled and said, “I’ll never get one.” This was heartbreaking for me.
I learned, while working at Justice Now, about Marcy’s Law, which has extended the period of time people inside need to wait between parole board hearings. While before this law, if someone was denied a release date, they might have to wait a year or 3 years before another hearing, now people often need to wait up to 15 years. This could mean, especially with the terrible prison healthcare, that someone affected by Marcy’s Law, could not live to their next hearing. I really hope that her hearing goes well.

Every intern makes a trip to the two women’s prisons once every three weeks. The two prisons Justice Now works with are a few hours away by car. On these days, you will meet your supervisor at 6:30 in the morning and arrive in the prisons at approximately 9:30 in the morning. You will meet with 3 or 4 people during the course of the day, each person for an hour or two hours. Depending on what the organization needs to be done, or what the individual intern’s tasks are, you will have different things to work on or talk about with each person. While I was really nervous before the first couple of prison visits, I realized with each visit how amazing and strong the people I was talking to were – and how amazingly willing everyone was to share their stories with me. While I might have a few questions to guide our conversations, it was never really necessary. One thing that I felt bad about was that some of the people I spoke with said that they had not always had the most positive experiences with interns in the past. Some had been cocky, or had misrepresented their conversations while on prison visits. My advice would be for future interns, that since all of your work is for people inside women’s prisons, all of what you do should be specifically guided by the experiences, needs and actual words of the people inside.
My work was not specifically advocating for reproductive rights, although my work with the prison medical healthcare system was related to the reproductive rights movement in that I responded to several women whose reproductive capacity was taken away by prison medical staff. I also did some line edits for a human rights report which will be released by Justice Now later this year entitled the “Safe Motherhood Report.” It details all the ways in which prisons take away people’s reproductive capacity - from forcing hysterectomies to shackling people during labor to incarcerating people during all of their reproductive years.

This work is so important because the abuses of human rights in prisons are rampant. People in prison are paid 8 to 12 cents per hour, yet charged 5 dollars per doctor’s visit. Doctors lie to them about their fatal medical conditions, actually enact physical harm upon them in order to save money and tell them they are lucky to be receiving any sort of medical care at all.

The prison system targets poor people of color for criminalization, arrest, and incarceration. Rather than channeling the money spent on prisons into the communities most targeted by the prison industrial complex, this country predominantly supports removing poor people of color and locking them up for life. Even when released, jobs for formerly incarcerated people is incredibly hard to come by, and there are very few affordable drug rehabilitation centers. Something needs to immediately change, and Justice Now is enacting this change. This is an incredible organization, filled with amazing, passionate people who treated me with respect and became my friends.

Not only is Justice Now an amazing organization, it is located in the Bay Area which is filled with vibrant activist communities and - especially in the summer - always
has something going on. I really encourage future applicants to consider working for Justice Now. I have had some great intern experiences in the past, but none can even compare to this one. I feel now as if I was a part of something real and important, and was able to do work that I believe in – which is such a privilege.