I worked with Kentucky Health Justice Network (KHJN) this summer to create a Trans Health Advocates Program. I asked KHJN if I could work on developing this program because most medical providers in Kentucky lack knowledge about transgender people's health needs, therefore making transgender people less likely to seek out medical care except when they feel like it is extremely urgent. From results of a study KHJN did in 2014 and experiences from those in the community, we know that seeking health care is a difficult and often triggering or traumatic experience for trans and gender non-conforming (GNC) individuals. This completely cuts access to regular, preemptive care that could greatly increase the quality of life and overall health of transgender Kentuckians.

This program aspires to adapt and improve upon the model started with the Trans Buddy program in Nashville, TN. Trans Health Advocates will serve the whole city of Louisville, and hopefully, eventually the whole state. The program will also put a greater focus on the intersectional barriers people face when accessing healthcare, such as structural and interpersonal racism, classism, ableism, and sizeism.

The first step was creating a training curriculum and a resource packet that addressed these barriers to care. This was easily the hardest part of starting the program, because it was one of the most important parts. I overcame this obstacle by breaking up the training into two sections: one that looked at the barriers trans people face when accessing healthcare and one that
helps advocates develop skills related to conflict resolution and trauma informed care. I then had a select group of professionals and people with various personal identities review the training to ensure that as many oppressed identities as possible were covered in the training in the best way possible.

We have set up a phone line and an online form by which trans patients can request a Trans Health Advocate. The advocate will work with the patient prior to the appointment to develop a plan for how they want the appointment to go, what their concerns are, and how we can address them. The advocate then goes with the patient to help address the patient's needs/concerns, provide emotional support, and facilitate productive and non-oppressive communication between the patient and the provider.

I sought out the first group of advocates by first looking in the circles I’m already a part of and by looking at KHJN’s existing volunteer base. This made the first training easier as I was already familiar with most of the people in the room, and it was also easier because I knew that these individuals already possessed some kind of competency in interacting with trans people. Going forward I plan to use an application for advocates so that I can get an idea of their background to determine what their training should include. This application has already been incredibly useful, as since announcing the Trans Health Advocates program there has been an overwhelming positive response with people interested in becoming advocates.

At the first training I was supposed to have eight advocates, but only four were able to show up for various reasons. However, it still felt very productive and like everyone in the space came willing to learn and discuss. It lasted a little over 3 hours, which allowed us to run through
some possible scenarios. I feel that having this time to work through possible issues was really helpful in ensuring the advocates felt comfortable and prepared to go to appointments. I really felt like talking with the advocates about developing the program and ensuring that the advocates took care of themselves really helped them feel like they had a voice in the program, and become more invested in its success. One of the problems I ran into was working with the various full schedules of the volunteer advocates. After I couldn’t make a couple of volunteers’ schedules work with any of the trainings, I quickly found that doing one-on-one trainings wasn’t an effective use of my time, as each training took at least three hours, regardless of the number of participants. It was also harder in general to do the trainings because it involves a lot of active discussion and practicing scenarios with multiple people.

I also worked with Giselle (the organizer at KHJN) to plan reproductive justice conversation nights, queer potlucks, and other events. I found this experience to be extremely important in understanding the needs of queer and trans people outside of my social group as it was a much more relaxed environment to discuss their healthcare needs, as opposed to the one on one conversations I also had with community members. This enabled me to build better relationships with community members as well as with the staff at KHJN.

I feel like one of my skills that was most useful during this internship was communication. First and foremost being able to effectively communicate respect and understanding is critical to existing in the world, but is especially necessary when you are collaborating with a large and diverse population, like that of the trans community in Louisville. It is important to keep everyone who is interested in a project like mine excited and engaged with
the progress that is being made, and that is mostly done through constant communication, making sure that they stay in the loop.

The highlight of my internship was either right after we announced the program on social media, I got the first call of someone requesting an advocate, or at the Pride event right after the announcement, when other trans people were approaching me to say how much this service is needed in our community. That made all of the effort this summer more than worth it, knowing that it would slightly lessen the burden of one other trans person trying to access healthcare.

My academic studies helped me a great deal in preparing for my internship. As a Social Change minor and a Political Science major, many of my classes deal with directly with issues of reproductive justice. It also helped with understanding the intersections/overlap between reproductive justice and social justice in general. This internship helped me further my decision to continue to work for organizations centered around reproductive justice. It also helped me understand what it’s like to work within a non-profit structure to affect social change, which will be incredibly important going forward in my career.

I absolutely loved working with KHJN, they really enabled me to pick what I wanted to work on and run with it. I am so lucky that I was able to participate in this program through CCLP, it really opened up a whole new world of possibilities, both for me as well as for my community. I am so thankful that we have KHJN here in Louisville, and that they are so supportive of working towards all segments of reproductive justice, especially when trans health is something that is often overlooked by southern reproductive justice
organizations and activists. KHJN’s organizational structure and board allows employees and activists to thrive, something that can be hard for non-profits to achieve.

I would hope that any future interns would be interested in continuing to expand this program so that it reaches a wider audience. This would require increased funding efforts as well as expanding training to more advocates that are located across Kentucky. Another piece of this project that KHJN is interested in seeing is an easy to understand guide, and possibly workshops or programs, explaining how insurance companies and new ACA regulations can help trans people get gender affirming procedures without having to be in too much debt. There is also the possibility in the future of offering more resources, trainings, and/or certifications for medical and mental health practitioners.