First of all, many thanks to the Civil Liberties and Public Policy program and the National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW) for giving me this amazing opportunity. I have learned so much, both from the people and work in the NAPW office as well as from the intern lunch sessions and other excursions. I was one of five interns at the office this summer (two undergrads, three law students) and we quickly formed a cohesive and friendly group. At NAPW I felt like a part of the team from the very beginning and am grateful to have done important work with such a great group of smart and inspiring people. Throughout the summer, I was honored by the level of responsibility and trust vested in the NAPW interns and am proud of all we accomplished in such a short time.

NAPW is a non-profit in Manhattan that does legal advocacy, public education, and organizing in support of pregnant and parenting women. Many of the cases that NAPW works on involve women who have been unable to overcome addiction during their pregnancies and are charged with anything from child abuse or neglect to homicide if their fetus or infant tests positive for drugs. Instead of receiving the addiction treatment they need, these women often face heavy-handed prison sentences as a result of the war on drugs and their children are frequently removed and put into the foster care system. Other cases include situations where incarceration has been used as a form of health care to ensure that women follow specific treatment plans despite the egregious state of health care in U.S. prisons, and incidents when a pregnant woman has been forced against her will to undergo major and often unnecessary medical procedures with many serious side effects.

I was initially excited about NAPW because I am interested in the U.S. legal system and public policy as well as women’s health and rights. NAPW exists at the nexus of these fields, and I was thrilled to be placed with an organization that was such a good match for me. I am lucky to have a mom who has made her career working in public health to improve maternity care, so I was aware of many of the barriers that pregnant women face when trying to access quality care. Before this summer I did not, however, know very much about the way the criminal justice and child welfare systems can negatively impact the pregnant and parenting women who are often most vulnerable. During the RRASC application process I was able to learn about NAPW’s work from my friend Paige, who was the NAPW RRASC intern last year. She explained that NAPW works on many cases in which “fetal rights” intersect with the war on drugs in a way that harms women, their families, and their communities. She also explained that NAPW seeks systemic change in order to better secure women’s rights and wellbeing. Talking with Paige gave me a better idea of what I could expect when I arrived in New York, and made me even more excited about my internship.
One of my major projects for the summer was researching cases in which a court had granted a hospital permission to perform cesarean surgery or another invasive medical procedure against a woman’s will for the supposed benefit of the fetus. The data I gathered about these cases will eventually be included in a national report about cases in which women were denied basic rights because of their pregnancies. This project involved media, academic literature, and WestLaw searches, contacting the attorneys, journalists, and other people who were involved in the cases, requesting court documents and photographs, filling out a data sheet, and writing memos on the status of any incomplete files. I came across several additional cases over the course of this project, and also reached out to and networked with academics in this field in order to share information and data. This project was one of my favorites for the summer because it gave me the opportunity to do in-depth research about these troubling cases and follow them from the very beginning through the aftermath and implications for future precedents. Doing the press coverage and academic literature searches allowed me to see both how differently the cases can be construed depending on who’s talking about them as well as how these cases have significant implications for myriad rights, including reproductive, religious, end of life, right to self-governance, right to raise children, etc. I became far more creative about how to get information as I moved forward with these cases and learned how to use several new databases including WestLaw and News Library. I also talked to lawyers and other individuals who were directly involved in the cases, which was eye-opening to say the least.

Another major project for the summer was creating an electronic database of files for cases in which a woman was arrested because of her pregnancy. This involved a lot of document scanning, which sometimes got a little tedious, but I got a lot out of this project as well. By sorting through the files and categorizing them I was able to become more familiar with both the nature of the cases as well as the different steps that the cases go through before they are resolved. Also, reading all the file documents helped me to learn to be able to identify and interpret a lot of legal jargon that was completely unfamiliar to me at the beginning of the summer. We had hoped to have this project completed by the end of the summer, but other projects with more pressing deadlines (such as the briefs and the surgical intervention files) kept being prioritized and this project fell by the wayside for a while. Luckily there is an intern starting in the fall who will continue this project.

I also had the opportunity to do a preliminary investigation and co-author a research request for a meta-analysis (currently in the works!) that will evaluate science and social science literature that claims a link between drug use and poor parenting. This was another of my favorite projects for the summer. I’m becoming increasingly interested in drug policy, so reading and thinking about the research question and the implications of this study were really engaging. I also learned a lot from trading drafts with NAPW’s Executive Director, Lynne Paltrow. Through the creation of this research request, I got valuable feedback about writing and editing
and learned more about major concepts we were dealing with (framing the issue, interpreting data, etc).

I also worked on organizing a community education event that will be held in September about methadone maintenance drug treatment, especially as it relates to pregnant and parenting women. This event was proposed in response to community pushback when a drug treatment clinic was constructed, and will include a panel of drug treatment experts and give the local community a chance to learn about methadone treatment and hopefully dispel some myths. My tasks for this project included creating and revising the flyer, researching venue and catering options, filling out presenter forms, communicating with other organizers, and creating a budget. Creating and getting feedback on the flyer was especially interesting, as it involved discussions with the NAPW staff about publicity, framing, message, etc. While I’ve organized several lectures and other events at school, I’ve never put together such an extensive event before. I’m glad to have had this experience, and I hope that the event goes well in September.

One of the most exciting parts of the summer was having the opportunity to directly contribute to three amicus curiae (friends of the court) briefs that NAPW filed while I was interning in the office. For one brief I drafted a detailed timeline about the case events and individuals involved, which the legal interns and staff used as a resource for creating their brief. For the other two briefs I had the responsibility of contacting and keeping track of the organizations and experts who agreed to sign on and participate in the briefs. I drafted and confirmed statements of interest for each signee, which told the court why they were participating in the case and qualified to have an educated opinion about the issues at hand. This gave me the opportunity to participate directly in precedent-setting cases, to experience the excitement of watching a case unfold, and to learn about amazing individuals and organizations around the world NAPW works with in order to create the strongest briefs possible. I now have a much more complete picture of the different strategies and paths that are used to tackle major social issues as well as a laundry list of organizations to contact about future internships and potential jobs and collaborations after graduation.

Other summer projects included researching arrest cases in South Carolina, maintaining the website, formatting and sending activist updates, updating the contact database, helping to send a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee asking them to ask Judge Sotomayor about her views on pregnant women’s rights during her Supreme Court confirmation hearing, organizing and filing research articles, and making signs and attending rallies calling for health care and the New York anti-shackling bill (to ban the use of shackles on laboring incarcerated women), and in memory of Dr. George Tiller.

Throughout all these amazing projects and experiences, I grew by leaps and bounds especially as a researcher and writer, became far more confident with public relations, and became clearer about my goals for the future. Several of my tasks
were daunting at first, but I was pleasantly surprised by what I was capable of doing and was working with a brilliant and supportive staff that I could turn to with any questions. I also really liked the other interns, who were a crew of smart, friendly, funny, and downright inspiring women.

My NAPW internship was a natural continuation of both my academic and personal interests, and also helped to prepare me to reach my future goals. As an American Studies major with a focus on public policy and social change, much of my course work has led me to grapple with many of the issues that resurfaced throughout the summer. My Sociology, Social Movements, Study of Women and Gender, Culture and Biology, Constitutional Law, and Public Policy Analysis courses were especially helpful and relevant to this internship. I was also able to draw on my activism experience as an organizer of Students for Social Justice and Institutional Change at Smith College, and apply skills and information I gained through my work-study job at the Prison Policy Initiative in Easthampton, MA. In turn, I came up with interesting paper topic ideas on a daily basis throughout the summer and am excited to bring when I learned at NAPW back to campus this fall. Through my work at NAPW I was able to pursue my interest in the US legal system (especially the criminal justice system), and became more interested in drug and immigration policy in particular. I am currently considering pursuing a law degree after I graduate, and so took full advantage of the opportunity to pepper the legal interns with questions about why they went to law school and their experiences as law students. While I’m still not sure that is the route I will take, I’m more informed about what law school involves and what doors a law degree can open. I am confident, however, that the non-profit/public interest sector is where I belong and was personally fulfilled by the work I did this summer.

While I always felt lucky to be engaged in important work that was meaningful to me, the issues that I encountered on a daily basis were difficult to grapple with. I researched case after case where women were denied basic rights and care and read legal decisions that have had a major impact on woman, children, families, and communities but were rendered based on stereotypes, misinformation, or flawed research. The sheer size of the institutional systems we were working to change is daunting, and I sometimes felt frustrated and helpless as I watched senseless policy wreak havoc in human lives. An ever-present sense of teamwork and humor in the office helped me to keep a sense of perspective and optimism, though. I also became more aware of my own limitations as a single individual (with only 10 weeks!), and how difficult it can be to prioritize and live a balanced life in the non-profit world when there is clearly so much work to be done. It was instructive to watch the NAPW staff and the choices they made in order to nourish themselves despite such difficult work.

I would suggest that future RRASC interns be open to immersing themselves in both the community of activists they are joining for the summer and the larger environment they are in, especially if it is new. This summer I truly enjoyed getting to know the NAPW staff and other interns, and learned so much from the time I
spent with them in the office as well as out of it. We took part in several brown bag lunch series and workshops at other impressive organizations around New York City, including the Innocence Project, the Center for Reproductive Rights, the Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, Legal Momentum, MergerWatch, Law Students for Reproductive Justice, and the American Civil Liberties Union. At these events I was exposed to different viewpoints and new information about critical issues and was inspired by the awesome work that all of these organizations do.

Beyond the activist community, I had a blast getting to know and explore New York City all summer. I sublet an apartment in Washington Heights and got a subway pass, library card, and a book of free and cheap things to do in the city. I filled my evenings and weekends with lots of museums and parks, concerts and plays, dancing, farmers’ markets, hanging out with friends, trips to Coney Island, Staten Island, and Governor’s Island, and lots and lots of people watching and long walks around the city.

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be a RRASC intern. This internship has challenged me to question and further develop my ideas and assumptions, given me the opportunity to hone critical skills, stretched me to grow as a person and an activist, and inspired me to continue to develop a career in the non-profit world. A million thanks to the CLPP program for supporting me through such an incredible experience, and also to the National Advocates for Pregnant Women for being such a fantastic host organization.