Final Report

During the summer I worked on several related but varied projects at Justice Now. For a relatively small organization, staffing only 8 people, Justice Now takes on a good deal of projects--both an achievement and a failing of the organization. As of right now, they work in three distinct but mutually supportive programmatic areas: direct services, campaign and human rights. I was rather uniquely working in all three programmatic areas, as well as in between them. Several of the projects I was involved with could have functioned as unrelated despite their linked goals. Fortunately, I was able to very directly link them all. My greatest critique of Justice Now is that the program areas wind up being too disparate, thus minimizing their radical and cohesive potential. It is often the individual intern that must put their daily work in context. I was lucky to find deep connections between my various projects that inspired collaboration within the office along with allies inside and outside prison. I was also supported in engaging with other projects, to which I was not originally assigned. In the direct services program area, I was the intern assigned the majority of the family law/child custody issues. By the end of the summer I had worked with close to 20 people as an advocate on these matters as well as advised and worked with people in the office on intersecting issues as they arose. All of this work, as it was legal advocacy and not representation, entailed extensive calling, letter/email writing, researching, and direct contact with people inside prison on a regular basis. I was tracking children, researching the convoluted filing procedures of certain crucial petitions, as well as doing crisis counseling. I also frequently acted as the go-between for our clients and their families when they could not contact each other or their court-appointed representation/social workers. Sometimes I was involved in situations that ended relatively happily, i.e. a child was found and contacted, a guardianship
petition filed, an appeal won. However, many times I felt helplessly limited, frustrated with the system, and in despair about the circumstances and stigmatization my friends and clients faced. I received calls from people inside prison daily, much more frequently than those working in different project areas. I responded to people newly affiliated with Justice Now as well as many who had been working with the organization for years. Despite the frustration, the child custody and parenting work was extremely rewarding and empowering. Through the work I gained skills in organization, crisis management, persuasive speaking, outreach, research, persistence and mutual empowerment.

On the side, within the direct services department, I worked informally with a friend and co-intern on translating previously English only paperwork into Spanish and handling any situations that arose with people who were mono-lingual Spanish speakers.

Also in the direct services department, I worked on a project that was aimed at creating an informal educational and support network with and for people inside prison. The purpose was to supplement the minimal resources provided inside the prison walls. I informally joined this project as it became increasingly apparent to me that peer education networks that were simultaneously technically helpful and politically empowering were absolutely necessary. This project was birthed from the minds of people inside prison and was still in its nascent stages despite years of slow progress. The work we did over the summer became a lot about political organizing and education. Developing leadership of people most impacted was definitely a goal of most of us working on the project. However, there were tensions regarding our approach and its implications that came up in many areas over the summer, leaving much of the larger work at a standstill. Within the office, this project straddled the lines of the direct services and the campaign departments, which were ideally inextricable, but in practice divergent. I felt like I gained a lot of intellectual insight working on this project. I learned to work and organize collaboratively and was able to build on much of what I had learned both experientially and
academically at Hampshire and the five colleges. At Justice Now I was empowered and supported to more thoroughly realize and better articulate the vision of abolishing the prison industrial complex. I also learned tangible strategies toward creating the world we envisioned. Much of this empowerment came from the constant internal critique emanating out of the campaign department, to which I felt deeply connected.

The campaign department is the area of the organization that focuses on everything from policy to public relations to alliance building to development. All of these are components that fall within the ideological framework of prison industrial complex abolition organizing—not the case at most organizations. This 'department' articulates the context in which all of the other program areas are meant to be working and for what ends. In this department, I was co-writing a briefing paper for allies and future allied movements such as the radical anti-violence movement, gender/queer liberation movement, and the Reproductive Justice movement, to name a few. The paper was meant to articulate a new lens and cross-movement strategy, called “gender justice”. This was a project about ideological messaging and strategic framing and alliance building. I found it extremely exciting and interesting. Simultaneously, my co-workers and I were drafting parallel briefing papers both for people inside prison and inside academic circles. I learned a great deal about intentional organizational and movement development as well as strategic outreach and un-compromised radical visions. Every word, every action and the origin of every dollar mattered in building the kind of world that we envisioned. Though there was tension about the vision and how to achieve it during the daily grind, as well as leadership models and approaches to combating white supremacy within the organization as well as staying consistent with espoused missions overall, I was extremely inspired and empowered by the boldness of Justice Now's vision and many of its actions.

I think Justice Now has enormous potential and offers something unique and unparalleled with its
summer intern program. Due to the tensions I’ve mentioned and the commitment to the work at all levels, some of the campaign work turned inward this summer. We organized as interns, led by the interns of color, to hold Justice Now accountable to itself, its comrades inside, its clients and the larger abolition movement, and push it toward its vision. We focused on lack of transparency, hierarchical models, and unintentional intern recruitment in our analysis of Justice Now’s relative complacency in the face of white supremacy. The organization demonstrated its radical potential by responding to these critiques with deep concern and self-reflection as well as with short and long term goals for change. This was an incredible experience and gift. I learned to expect the most from any organization while remaining respectful and grateful to its incredible strides. I saw in action the constant dialectic and questioning that needs to happen. This sort of internal dialogue is so necessary for radical organizations to not be counter-productive nor to perpetuate the systems they oppose.

Though I did find a great deal of deeply useful guidance from supervisors, interns and comrades inside prison, I was also relatively self-guided. This allowed me a great deal of freedom without ever feeling alone. I thrive in self-directed situations if they are simultaneously collaborative. Working more than 50 hours a week on average (by choice), and largely determining my daily activities, I was extremely fulfilled and stimulated by the work. I rarely felt at a loss for what to do. I was also very prepared for the work I was doing, though the nature of it was entirely new to me. Thematically, what I was doing could not have been more relevant to my thesis research. I quickly grasped California's specific situation and legal peculiarities and felt comfortable with the larger context. This was due in no small part to the guidance I had received and independent work I had done with professors and community members in the Pioneer Valley.

Every week we would make prison visits, alternating which interns and staff went. The visits are made to the two California state women's facilities in Chowchilla, a town in the central valley of California.
Here are imprisoned the largest population of state-identified female people in the world. The days of the visits were the longest, and best of the summer. My prison visits were relevant to both direct services and campaign. Due to the specific work I was doing, and my approach, I was able to build deep bonds with the people I was working with inside. The combination of the services I was able to provide based on my privileged position working with a law office in the free world, the knowledge I was able to gain from the experiences and wisdom of the people I met, and the strategizing we were able to collaborate on, was thrilling and inspiring to both me and the people I was working with. The nature of my visits with people were about meeting immediate needs and working together for larger change, however they varied in their specific requirements. Sometimes, if the issue was particularly urgent, meaning a court date was rapidly approaching or a timeframe ending, I would need to gather information as legal professional, while still being humanly supportive and collaborative. Other times, there was nothing pressing, just more general updates and extended time slots allowed us to simply brainstorm together and build trust with one another. The course of my relationship with someone would at times change suddenly and dramatically depending on what other obstacles they were facing. One person, with whom I became very close, was originally concerned only with the custody of her child upon her imminent release until suddenly that release was postponed and other aspects of her freedom were put into question.

Another incredibly inspiring weekly activity that was integral to our internship program was our public education workshop led by two amazing female-identified people from allied organizations. One was an active member of the national collective, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and the other was an active member of the white anti-racist organization, Catalyst. Both came from an organization, CARA (Communities Against Rape and Abuse) in Seattle, Washington. The weekly 2 hour sessions were engaging, challenging and never enough. They were meant to ground our work while also providing the theoretical context and discussion that not all of us were privy to. Many of our critiques
and strategies came out of these sessions and many of the tensions that arose from ideological and lived differences were manifested. This activity was crucial to my experience this summer and brought us all together in an effort to combat isolation and individualism in the work space that characterizes the failings of so many radical non-profits and the problems with the entire non-profit industrial complex. In the workshop we were challenged with complex academic materials and on-the-ground films and writings. We developed skills in framing and analysis as well as grounding the theoretical, strategizing from theory and being consistent in organizing methods.

Also aiding me in my understanding of the larger context and directly relevant to my thesis was my work with the human rights department within Justice Now. In this department I was working on an almost-completed report regarding pregnancy and postpartum care in the California prison system. The report is coming from an abolitionist perspective and though it suggests relevant policy reform, advocates for an overhaul of the system and finds that prisons themselves are violent. They collected their information through human rights interviews with people we work with inside and by training people inside to interview others. What I was working on was following the lead we had on doulas who were working at one of the prisons we were reporting on in a volunteer capacity. We had had trouble up until that point finding them and actually identifying them, not to mention hearing their side of the story. This wound up being my most minor project, but it was interesting nonetheless, and totally related to my direct service work as some of the women I was working with had been interviewed for the report and/or had given birth while imprisoned. The other work I did for the report was review its recommendations, keeping the messaging consistent with our vision, and solicit government interviews, which went surprisingly well. We were able to obtain an interview with the receiver who oversees the entire California Prison medical system, at his office in Sacramento, for the last week of my internship. It was a fascinating experience having spent the summer working with individuals imprisoned in the system he was overseeing and impacted directly by all of his decisions.
Since we do not receive government funding and do not work with the prison system to reform it, this was the only opportunity I had to see the mainstream governmental perspective first hand and witness the gap between those deciding and those impacted by policies.

I was also enlisted by other interns to work on the promotion of the report and the related bill, AB2070 'Keeping Families Whole', that would expand the timeframe that parents have before they lose their parental rights, once their children enter the foster care system. I was working with interns and friends/clients inside to create an op-ed series highlighting people's experiences with this timeframe, what they had witnessed regarding its effects, their opinions on its existence and larger discussions of parenting from inside prison. This was fascinating and also wonderfully connected to all my other work. In fact, the intern with whom I was working on this project and I connected the writing people were doing with us to the peer education project. This way, even if the op-eds weren't successfully placed, the insight that we had garnered would not be wasted and would in fact benefit the people most impacted. This was one of the many examples of the opportunities I had to exercise creative collaboration and connections. As interns, our input, ideas and even critiques, as I mentioned before, were always welcome. The space in which change could occur while change was being worked for, was building and growing in my short time there.

I am so excited to see what Justice Now continues to do in the future. Though their programmatic and leadership structures might shift to reflect our critiques and their desire to always progress in a more radical and self-critical direction, their vision remains strong. The potential they embody and the work they have done for the movement and individuals inside prisons is incredible. They are one of the most exciting organizations to me and probably one of the five most ground-breaking legal organizations in the country. I am so grateful for my opportunity to work with them and I have been deeply impacted by my experience this summer. My confidence, my organizing strategies, my people skills, my legal
understanding and my organizational competency have been significantly improved. I am empowered
to go in many different directions using the training and experience that I received at Justice Now. I
had wanted to figure out if the legal route was for me this summer-- Justice Now offering one of the
most radical paths for that degree. I am still unsure, having received mixed messages from the many
lawyers and law students with whom I worked. However, I do feel, more than ever, that I could
successfully pursue this avenue of social change. This is partially due to all that I learned regarding the
tension between working within and without the system, a tension at the heart of an abolition
organization that provides direct services. I feel better equipped to negotiate this tension having done
this internship and thoroughly inspired to remain engaged with the Prison Industrial Complex abolition
movement as well as allied movements.