This summer, I was lucky enough to work at Justice Now. Some of my responsibilities included responding to letters from incarcerated people all over the country, working on the creation of a compliance report that evaluates what has happened since the passage of their anti-sterilization bill, as well as providing direct services to and developing relationships with our partners on the inside at California Central Women’s Facility.

I was especially excited to be interning at Justice Now because their work—and way of working—has been and continues to be extremely influential in my academia and activism. I began studying the carceral state in the context of reproductive justice. From access to safe abortion and reproductive health care to the ability to have relationships with one’s children—every aspect of women’s reproductive freedom is severely impacted by the carceral system. The fact that women who are incarcerated are disproportionately women of color and economically disadvantaged, the same women who have the greatest history of reproductive oppression, cannot be dismissed as coincidence and must be recognized. Beyond reproductive oppression, it is clear that incarceration inevitably entails the systematic denial and negation of one’s basic civil, constitutional, and human rights. The struggle against this criminal system of injustice can seem daunting at times but organizations such as Justice Now provide me with immense hope and inspiration for the future of the movement. This is a battle that will not be easily won but, thanks to Justice Now and other incredible activists, I know it is possible and am so grateful to have been a part of it.

My introduction to Justice Now was through their “Let Our Families Have a Future
Campaign.” I was doing a semester-long research project on forced sterilization in California prisons as a product of eugenics that revolved around the efforts of Justice. It was unreal to me that I would be working with the people who were responsible for ending this practice. My excitement grew when I found out I would be assisting them in the creation of compliance report on the very law and subject that had brought me there in the first place.

Misty Rojo, my project supervisor, and I decided that the majority of my work on the compliance report would revolve around identifying and reaching out to organizations and individuals we saw as potential collaborators. I expressed an interest in the aspect of the report that had to do with the inclusion of people who were/are directly affected by SB1135 and have immediate experience with reproductive health care in carceral institutions. This consisted of me identifying people in CCWF who were interested in participating as well as researching and compiling a list of advocacy organizations who would be able to assist us in connecting with people who are incarcerated in other counties that are experiencing issues with their reproductive health care and have been directly affected by the passage of SB1135. I spent a significant portion of my summer researching specific counties to center and then looking at their demographics (both inside and outside of prison) as well as organizations located in those areas that might be able to help us get access to the people inside. I compiled a list of various counties and organizations for us to focus on and wrote a template for an outreach email but we have not sent it out yet.

In addition to this, I concentrated a great deal on the denial of reproductive health care—specifically hysterectomies—that has occurred since the passage of SB1135 after it was brought to our attention that this was a problem multiple people at CCWF were experiencing. My direct service work led us to realize that numerous people were being denied of their right to a
hysterectomy. Justice Now had been very intentional to allow for the performance of hysterectomies in part because they did not want the law to infringe upon a person’s ability to obtain gender-affirming surgery. Additionally, people were being informed that the “law suits” (a fiction invented by prison staff) made it so doctors could not treat the medical issues which in turn made diagnosing them irrelevant.

It became clear that in addition to being denied the procedure, people were not made aware of their right to a second opinion by a physician who is not employed by the institution and, in turn, were not provided with the opportunity to meet with one. For this reason, I made a questionnaire about people’s experiences with getting or being denied hysterectomies and brought in a Know Your Rights paper that specifically explained the part of SB1135 that covered hysterectomies.

Beyond providing direct service and doing campaign work, a huge part of my internship revolved around forming relationships with the people we work with on the inside. I truly recommend that all future interns actually get to know the people they visit with on the inside. Beyond learning about the issues they’re experiencing it’s important to learn about their interests and the things they care about. Doing this helped me form a more authentic and rewarding relationship for both of us. Additionally, at my exit-interview, my supervisor told me the staff had been especially impressed by my choice to research and collect articles that I thought would be of interest to the people I met with on the inside. They said that this was part of why they would love to have me back, because I cared about the actual people and not just the projects. I was surprised that this even came up because to me, this honestly seemed more like a perk than anything else. I was excited to have the opportunity to get to develop relationships with these people, to talk, to learn, and to grow together. It did not feel like work, it felt like exactly what I
was supposed to be doing. Moreover, I think relationships are central to justice. Jails and prisons isolate people because, since the first white supremacist attempts at colonization and enslavement, oppressors have recognized the importance and power of human connection. By coming together and refusing to let these cages define or divide people, we come one step closer to justice.

I think one of the most challenging things for me this summer was figuring out what to prioritize. The order in which I should do things, both in terms of their importance and the time they would take, was a lot easier for me to figure out when I was working on prison visit follow up and other projects related to direct services but more difficult when it came to working on the compliance report. The amount of freedom I had in deciding what to do for the compliance report proved difficult at times because I frequently questioned whether or not I was doing the most beneficial thing which would lead to me jumping between different parts of the project and, in turn, not giving them as much attention as I would have liked to. I think it would have been better if I had been more intentional in planning by creating a list of goals and a timeline establishing deadlines for their accomplishment. I also think a lot of this might have been different/easier if we had had access to the office.

This issue also reflects what I believe my greatest challenge of the summer was: overcoming my need to do things exactly right. It is a challenge that grew out of my time at Hampshire. It is a challenge that is put on me by myself and others to prove myself as the “perfect” activist. It is a challenge that prevents me from being the activist I need to be.

There are two moments when I received support and guidance that I think about nearly everyday. One of which came at the end of my first week when my supervisor, the brave and brilliant Misty Rojo, told me that perfectionism is a product of white supremacy, so fighting it is
a part of fighting the system. If I continue to strive for perfection, I am subscribing to the ideology I strive to abolish.

The second came at my last prison visit of the summer when I was meeting with a woman I had gotten to know fairly well. She asked me how I felt about my summer and the work I had done, I told her that I was really pleased with it but felt like I should have done more. She told me not to underestimate or undervalue what I had done because, for her, simply forming a relationship with me and knowing that she had someone in her corner when she went to sleep at night was more than she could dream of. This was always what I wanted, to support her in the way she wanted to be supported. This was why I chose Justice Now, an organization led by and for the people who were directly impacted by incarceration. And as I reflect on my time, there is nothing I am prouder of or more grateful for than knowing them.

The awareness that my work will have a positive, tangible impact and genuinely help people was by far the most rewarding part of my work. I spend a lot of time dealing with issues related to reproductive justice and the carceral state in indirect ways (i.e. writing papers), which makes it difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Here, I was still addressing heavy, depressing issues but in a way that allows me to connect to real people. Getting to work with the Justice Now staff and people on the inside gave me a renewed hope. Forming real relationships with the people I was working on and helping to provide them with the things they wanted, be it informational resources or medical advocacy, was really powerful and motivational.

I had also been struggling with the decision of whether or not to go to law school, being surrounded by people working to abolish the system; I was constantly reminded of how miserable attending law school would inevitably make me. I maintained, however, that it was something I needed to do even if it wasn’t necessary something I wanted to do. I knew that, no
matter what, even if I never litigated a day in my life, having that degree would be beneficial for the work I’d be doing and the individuals I’d be doing it for because of the way our country operates. At Justice Now, I was reminded of how something as little as the initials “JD” could make a world of difference. Having an attorney on staff allowed the organization to send legal mail and conduct legal visits. While this may seem small, it is actually monumental and crucial for the success—or even possibility—of their work. As a result of attorney-client privilege, we were able to have confidential communication with our partners on the inside and, in turn, able to actually address the issues that needed addressing. This was huge for me to see and I now feel more confident than ever in my decision to go to law school.

I would also remind people that just because their internship ends, it doesn’t mean their involvement has to. I know that my internship at Justice Now is one of the most important experiences of my life because, even now as I am thousands of miles away, I don’t go a day without thinking of it. I carry the people I worked with on the inside and outside in my heart everyday.