Working at National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW) as a RRASC Intern was a remarkable experience. Through my work and interactions with core staff members, as well as hearing of women’s current struggles to preserve their human and bodily rights, I have learned of the horrific ways in which people’s pregnant and birthing bodies are controlled and abused by the very systems in place that are intended to offer them help. The rights of pregnant people are currently being threatened by legislators, medical personnel, and the widespread distribution of junk journalism. These threats are all based on the idea that the fertilized eggs, embryos, and fetuses of pregnant and birthing women can be attributed personhood, and therefore require the same level of protection as a born human. However, as NAPW and the women they work with have clearly demonstrated, pregnant and birthing people are denied their own rights as a result of these personhood measures. Women are forced to have cesarean surgery, denied the recommended treatment for opioid addiction while pregnant, and treated as less than human, simply due to their status of being pregnant. My work at NAPW has enabled me to gain a comprehensive understanding of these issues.

My academic background prepared me very well for working as an intern at NAPW. My course load has always consisted of classes that focus on issues of reproductive justice, even if it reproductive justice is not an explicit topic within a class discussion. So previous to my internship at NAPW, I had a great deal of experience working within the reproductive justice framework. The class that my thoughts returned to the most during my time in New York was The Politics of The Abortion Debate taught by Marlene Fried. *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts, which Marlene had included in her syllabus, was a book that was referenced frequently by Lynn Paltrow, Executive Director at NAPW. While Lynne often summarized the main points of Robert’s work, it was so beneficial to have an academic understanding of the history oppression against black women’s reproductive bodies. In order to enforce slavery, and to justify the practice of taking black women’s children away from them, white Americans had to
believe that black women were poor mothers who didn’t care about their children. Unfortunately this is an ideology that has carried over into the present day. It permeates the way the many think about mothers of color, pregnant women who use drugs, mothers who are under the poverty line, and any other parents that falls outside the white, middle-class, normative expectation for raising children. My academic background was certainly beneficial in entering into my internship at NAPW.

My role within the organization was as a full-time undergraduate intern. Along with two other undergraduate students, my work generally consisted of research for NAPW’s future educational outreach projects. I began the summer by doing extensive research into Tennessee’s Drug Court system. This involved looking into how the courts are regulated, what participating in the program entails, which kind of treatment each court provides, and specifically how pregnant women interact within the drug courts. The basis for this research was Tennessee’s passing of HB1295/SB1391. Working under principles of chemical endangerment, fetal personhood, and therefore child abuse, this piece of legislation allows a pregnant woman to be prosecuted for assault if her fetus is considered to be harmed as a result of her narcotic drug use during pregnancy. The intention behind the law appears to be forcing drug-using pregnant women into court mandated drug rehab so that babies cease to be born with an opioid dependency. While successful completion of a treatment program can supposedly be used as an affirmative defense, women who use drugs while pregnant are still going to be unnecessarily pulled into the criminal justice system. The bill does not explicitly state the pathway that prosecuted women will take through the criminal justice system, but it appears that the intention is to have them diverted into Drug Court Treatment Programs throughout the state. It is therefore essential that the Drug Court Treatment Programs in Tennessee be well understood so that we may work to understand how pregnant women will be cared for once they enter the criminal justice system as a result of this new law.

This research project was initially intended to be quite simple: where are the state’s drug courts located, who is eligible to participate in them, what treatment services do they provide, do they offer maintenance treatment, and do they have any programs directed towards pregnant participants? As I began the project however, I realized that the role of Tennessee’s treatment programs and drug courts in pregnant women’s lives is much more complicated than simply where they are located. The law, which came into effect July 1, 2014, not only utilizes scientifically inaccurate terminology such as babies being “born addicted,” but fails to comply with national medical recommendations from leading medical organizations (such as the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) for the treatment of pregnant women and newborns who have an opioid dependency. In addition, the so-called “crisis” of pregnant people who have used opioids is fuelled by media that uses scientifically inaccurate information and scare tactics equivalent to that of the “crack baby epidemic”. My work on Tennessee Drug Courts therefore involved gaining an understanding of the state’s overall mission to end drug abuse, HB1295/SB1391, treatment programs separate from drug courts, and the approach to treating pregnant women that is encouraged by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (TDMHSAS).
also made phone calls to each of the state’s 45 drug courts, although I was only able to conduct six interviews. The research project resulted in a report and analytical written piece, a fact sheet, a table of contact information for the drug courts in Tennessee, and interview notes from the phone calls.

My other major assignment was another research based project that looked into Oklahoma’s Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs). I was told to look through each of the CPC websites to see what information they provided, analyze how they presented themselves, and discuss their presentation of abortion procedures and clinics. More specifically I was looking at what the groups’ approaches were to persuading pregnant people to carry their pregnancies to term. This project resulted in a simple written collection of my research findings for each of Oklahoma’s CPCs. During my last week at NAPW, I visited an NYC CPC with another undergraduate intern to gather their hand-out information.

The rest of my time at NAPW was spent doing small administrative work (for example database entry, making citations, and finding links for relevant articles), brief research for core staff members, participating in group discussions, and watching relevant webinars and films with the other interns. We also attended biweekly Brown Bag talks at the Innocence Project, an LSRJ Intern Training, and at least three other meetings with other people working for drug policy reform. Throughout my 10 weeks at NAPW, my research skills were definitely the most utilized. While it’s not always what is necessary for me to, I tend to stray from the questions I am initially supposed to answer. This ended up being quite helpful in my work at NAPW, especially in the drug court project. I am always willing to push past the factual surface of an answer in order to understand the deeper intricacies of the issue at hand. This tendency of mine, which some like to call getting sidetracked, ended up being quite valuable and I was able to make essential links in my research.

However the highlights of the internship were not my research projects, but simply having discussions with the core staff and the other interns. It was such a pleasure, for example, to be able to watch an infuriating documentary about the child welfare system and then be able to debrief with the remarkable members of the office, which included Lynn Paltrow, Farah Diaz-Tello, Laura Huss, Kailee Sutherland, Sara Ainsworth, Jeanne Flavin, four legal interns, and the other two undergraduate interns. It was an honor and incredibly educating experience to be able to interact with people on a daily basis who care so deeply about the same issues that I do. I was always learning and thinking and challenging my perceptions of incarceration, drug use, drug use during pregnancy, the War on Drugs, legislators, health care, and many other issues that are relevant to the work that NAPW does. Simply through discussions and lecture style talks, I was able to identify the intersections between reproductive rights and the War on Drugs, the child welfare system, and the criminal justice system. If we are ever going to achieve reproductive justice, these social issues need to see some dramatic changes. It was through my work at NAPW that I am now able to articulate what I understand to be fundamental problems within the current relationship between pregnant women, mothers, parents, and the criminal and social systems that claim to be offering help.

While I was glad that the research based work I was doing for NAPW was helpful
to them, it was actually quite challenging for me to come to the office every day and spend that much time at a computer. Within the first two weeks of work, I realized that working in an office is not what is going to make me happy in my life-long pursuit of working towards reproductive justice. It is so important that there are people out there who are willing to do this type of work and love to do so, but this internship helped me to discover that I am not one of those people. I’m good at doing research and writing papers and being critical, but I’ve learned that an office is not the setting for me to do these things. Discovering this actually made me happy because it makes me even more sure that I want to continue my path towards becoming a doula and midwife. To get through the summer, I simply persisted. It was sometimes challenging to stay focused and feel productive, but I would remedy this by taking a walk around midtown, or going out for my lunch break. While I do not plan on returning to an office situation, I am so glad that I was able to gain the knowledge I did from NAPW, as it will make me a much stronger participant within the field of birth work.

I would recommend that new interns working with NAPW be aware of how research heavy the undergraduate intern work tends to be. Again, I am a good researcher, but I was a little unaware of how intense that part of the internship would be. That being said, I am still so glad I had the opportunity to work with NAPW. My RRASC internship at has taught me an incredible amount about reproductive justice. NAPW’s work is a necessary part of the movement to achieve reproductive health, rights, and justice and the work that each of the staff members does is essential and inspiring. I have grown as an activist, student, future birth worker, and human being.

More information on RRASC internship program: clpp.hampshire.edu/RRASC