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Reproductive Rights Activist Services Corps 2017 Internship Report
Reproductive Health Access Project

This summer I was an intern at the Reproductive Health Access Project (RHAP) in New York City. Working for RHAP was one of the most formative experiences I have ever had. I enjoyed my time there immensely and will forever value the skills that I learned.

During my internship, I spent three and half days in the office and one and a half days in the clinic that RHAP is affiliated with. While in the clinic, I worked as a doula, providing emotional support for patients who were having abortion procedures, IUD insertions, and endometrial biopsies. Going into my internship, I had no doula experience, although I had training in support skills through my work as a rape crisis counselor. Although I expected that RHAP was going to provide me with a formal doula training, I instead started as a doula right away on my first day in the clinic. Through physician feedback, experience, and observation I learned the skills that I needed to, and by the end of my internship felt very comfortable in my role as a doula. However, I would still like to receive a formalized training.

Being a doula and working in the clinic was one of the most memorable experiences of my internship. Although I have done a lot of school-based learning about the politics of abortion and contraception, having the experience of being able to actually witness these procedures was incredibly formative and contextualized everything that I had been learning for the past three years at school. I also felt that working in the clinic contextualized the work I did at RHAP, and made me realize why RHAP’s mission is so important. Because the clinic I worked in also trains residents, and I sat in the precepting room with all of the providers, I also learned a lot about the day-to-day experiences of physicians working in reproductive health. I also witnessed a lot of the training, so I could describe to you, step-by-step, how to complete an abortion procedure, IUD,
or Nexplanon insertion. I also learned a lot about contraception in general and contraception counseling. This is something that I am especially grateful for, as learning the steps of abortion procedure in-depth completely de-stigmatized the procedure for me.

Being a doula was both an incredibly rewarding and emotionally challenging experience. I felt incredibly grateful that people allowed me to be with them and support them in such vulnerable and emotional moments. The bonds we formed in short amounts of time were incredibly meaningful, and I could really see the importance of my role as a doula in helping sooth the discomfort of the procedure. I was constantly amazed by the range of human feeling, as each person experienced the same procedure in completely different ways, expressing different levels of pain and emotions throughout. I found that often the most helpful thing I was able to do was make small talk with people to distract them, and as a result I learned a lot about my patients in short amounts of time and was able to connect with them in a way that allowed them to be vulnerable with me. Forming so many short but meaningful relationships throughout the day was incredible, but also took a lot of energy and strength. Also, while some procedures were smooth and patients tolerated them very well, others were much harder. There were a couple of times that a patient I was working with became triggered during a procedure. In these moments, I felt that my role was even more important, but it was also incredibly hard to manage and often left me feeling very depleted. This was made harder by the fact that the providers I worked with seemed largely unaffected by these experiences, and so I didn’t have the opportunities to decompress these experiences and be supported in them as I would have liked. Overall, being a doula was one of my favorite parts of interning with RHAP. I learned so many important support skills, especially in regards to how to help people manage physical pain. I learned so much about how to be an effective doula and gained confidence in my skills. I also learned a lot of technical
and practical knowledge about abortion procedures and contraception that has grounded the more theoretical work I’ve been doing at school. I am now confident that I want to work towards getting a clinical degree so that I can keep working in reproductive health within a clinical setting.

The other part of the week, I worked in RHAP’s office on both short term tasks and long term projects. I also had the opportunity, towards the later part of my internship, to suggest projects that I wanted to work on, which were well received and supported by my supervisors. The first thing I want say about RHAP is that they are an amazing team. I loved all of my co-workers, and they worked to make me feel supported and appreciated every day. The team at RHAP is very close and has strong interpersonal relationships, which was a beautiful thing to be a part of. From my first day at the office I felt really comfortable with everyone, and throughout the summer I was able to strengthen those bonds. The team at RHAP is small, but as a result I was able to have personal and work relationships with everyone who worked there. I had an especially supportive relationship with my supervisor, Naomi. Naomi and I worked at desks next to each other, so as a result I was able to get a lot of support from her and we were able to check in every day. She was always super clear about what was expected of me, and was always grateful for the work I did.

During my time at RHAP, I worked on a series of long term projects and tasks. One of the things I did was communication work; specifically, I was in charge of updating and managing RHAP’s Facebook and Twitter pages. This was one of my favorite projects. I really enjoyed the opportunity to read so much RJ news and express my voice through my organization’s social media. Throughout my time at RHAP I was also able to participate in a couple of social media campaigns, which was a great way to connect to other RJ organizations.
and show solidarity. One of the campaigns I joined was “Expose Fake Clinics,” a campaign to bring awareness to Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs) and facilitate actions aimed at shutting them down. I learned a lot about CPCs through this campaign, and now hope to continue to do more research about them. The other campaign I participated in was National Health Center Week, a week which celebrates Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), like the clinic I worked for. For this campaign I made a series of five graphics for our social media which highlighted the importance of FQHCS, particularly the ways they interact with reproductive health care. Through this campaign I was trying to both make the organizers of National Health Center Week more aware of the reproductive justice movement, while simultaneously making the RJ movement more aware of the importance of FQHCs in helping provide vital reproductive health care. This was a project that I came up with and proposed to my supervisor and executive director and they both fully supported me in it.

Another big project that I worked on was conducting qualitative interviews with physicians who participated in RHAP’s Miscarriage Care Initiative, which provides resources, equipment, and training to clinics so that they can incorporate full spectrum miscarriage management into their practices. Through this project, I conducted four thirty minute interviews. I learned a lot about how to conduct a successful interview for the purpose of research and evaluation. I also learned a lot about how integral full spectrum miscarriage care is to the reproductive justice movement, and all the ways that miscarriage is caught up in the abortion debate.

Through my internship, I also worked on a project in which I compiled a database of all of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) policy resolutions from 2012 onwards that pertain to reproductive justice. One of RHAP’s main projects is to work with the AAFP in
order encourage them to pass reproductive justice-oriented policies. I really enjoyed this work as I learned a lot from reading the different policies, and learned about the importance of policy work on the larger scale.

Another project that I really enjoyed working on was updating RHAP’s Mobilize page. On the Mobilize page, RHAP has a section for National Advocacy and a section for State Advocacy. These pages contain summaries of different legislation or actions that support or deter the RJ movement and includes ways that people can take action. Through my internship I added different pieces to both sections, which included doing research on specific legislation or actions and then writing summaries for the website. This was a great way to be more aware of current legislation that is protecting or threatening RJ and exposed to me to a lot of channels for activism. I particularly enjoyed this part of my internship because of how aware it made me of current issues and because it gave me an opportunity to be proactive and encourage others to be as well.

During my time at RHAP, the organization was doing a lot of thinking about the ways in which they were being trans-exclusionary in their work, and was working on reshaping their values and mission as an organization to be less gendered in their language and mission. One thing I realized through my internship is that a lot of RJ organizations are very trans-exclusionary and incredibly gendered in their language, which is a huge problem for the RJ movement. I was happy RHAP was working on this despite the barriers and resistance they were facing from some senior staff members. In response to this work, I proposed to RHAP that I wanted to review and edit their About page to remove gendered language. My supervisor and executive director were very supportive of this project. At the end, I felt like the work I did in this area was a huge accomplishment and I was also happy that RHAP agreed it should be a
priority. In a similar nature, I also updated RHAP’s abortion fact sheet to remove as much gendered language as possible. This proved to be difficult, as it is hard to change language that is embedded within statistics. Despite this, it was another great learning experience. In general one thing I really took away from this was a greater awareness of all the work RJ organizations need to do to be more gender and trans-inclusive in their work.

During my internship I also worked on many other projects and tasks. I was in charge of fulfilling all of RHAP’s store orders for their patient education materials, uploading newly translated patient education materials to RHAP’s website and store, working on RHAP’s Google AdWords account, helping update PowerPoints, entering survey data into Survey Monkey, and much more! Through all of these assignments, I gained a lot skills in WordPress, Excel, and Shopify. I particularly appreciated the variety of tasks that I had. I got to help contribute to every department of my organization, had a good mix of short term tasks and long term projects, and had projects that were comfortable for me and others that pushed me out of my comfort zone.

My internship at RHAP was incredible. I improved my writing, research, interview, and communications skills, as well as my skills in support. Through this internship I was able to contextualize a lot of my knowledge about reproductive justice. Taking classes in reproductive justice before this internship was definitely helpful, but the skills I learned in this internship were skills I could have never learned in a classroom. I know that in the future I will continue to work for RJ organizations, and hope to move into clinical practice one day. My suggestion for future interns at RHAP is to make sure you have the emotional support you need, not be afraid to propose your own projects, and to enjoy every second!