

Leadership in Action Justice for Children and Youth Project

Nhu Huynh

About Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY):

For my Leadership-in-Action Summer, I completed a virtual placement at the Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY), a non-profit legal aid clinic that provides select legal representation and advocacy for youth under 18 in Toronto and the vicinity. The organization consists of staff lawyers who work on three main projects, including Enhancing Access to Special Education (EASE), Street Youth Legal Services (SYLS), and Childhood Arrivals Support and Advocacy (CASA).

The Project Overview:

After the onboarding meeting with the JFCY team, I partnered with a fellow summer student to discuss how we create youth-friendly content to help support the organization's public outreach. We had different ideas on the type of medium that we would like to use; however, we reached a mutual agreement to do an educational comic book because it was most suitable for our targeted audience. Using the legal rights wiki and the hard-copy materials that JFCY sent to us, we selected several topics that we believe are most relevant for children and youth, such as leaving home rights or health & mental health.

The sheer amount of legal information on each topic made it difficult for us to determine what crucial piece of information to include in our comics, especially since both of us did not have a background in law. Nonetheless, we were motivated by the potential outcomes of our project as it would allow legal information to be more accessible for youth, whose understanding of legal rights is necessary to help them navigate the legal system. Therefore, my responsibilities were to divide the tasks, identify critical legal information, and draft the first comic. To further enhance my understanding of the legal issue, I was involved with additional projects, namely outreach activities to partnered organizations via email, shadowing lawyers at Zoom court process, and attending in-person drop-in events at one of our community centers to learn about the perspectives of youth who were facing conflicts with the legal system.

Responsibility:

My main responsibility was to raise public awareness on youth justice issues by creating and distributing public outreach material, such as the comic book. This also involves working collaboratively with my partner and the staff lawyers at JFCY to gain practical knowledge on the intersection between law and research to improve outcomes for justice-involved youth.

Week by Week Timeline:

My week-to-week task was as follows:

- **Week 1:**
 - Onboarding and reviewing legal material on the pamphlets:
 - We selected nine topics that were most relevant to youth to come up with an action plan.
 - The topics that I was responsible to review were: Cannabis Law, Leaving Home Rights, Bail hearings, and Mental Health Care
 - Community outreach
 - I researched contact information of other 10+ non-profit organizations to send outreach emails inviting for partnership with JFC.
- **Week 2:**
 - Weekly check-in on comics:
 - I started working on my sections. My partner and I met for our weekly check-in to support one another as necessary.
 - Mental health act presentation, substitute decision making and consent and capacity presentation:
 - I converted the information on our pamphlet and Street Law Smarts to a presentation, which will be presented by my mentor to the social workers at CTYS.
- **Week 3:**
 - The first draft completed:
 - My partner and I met to provide feedback on each other's first drafts, making changes when applicable.
 - Community outreach event:
 - I prepared a poster for our upcoming legal drop-in event at one of the partner community centers
- **Week 4:**
 - First draft feedback:
 - The comic was distributed internally to our staff lawyers for review and feedback
 - Legal drop-in event
 - I shadowed my mentor lawyer, who provided legal advice for a 25 years old youth on his immigration issue.
 - I interviewed some youth to learn more about their first-hand experience
- **Week 5:**
 - Court shadowing:
 - I attended a civil court as an observer through Zoom. Ours debrief at the end of the court allowed me to better understand the court process.

- Community outreach
 - I reached out to court workers in the province of Ontario (through email and phone call) to invite them to participate in a study that aimed to understand the court diversion process for youth.
- **Week 6:**
 - Revised draft:
 - I revised our final draft for the comic book based on the feedback of the lawyer.
 - Debrief
 - My mentors and I talked about our learning process throughout the 6-week internship

Outcomes:

The outcomes of my project produced a 14-page comic book that covers 11 legal topics that are relevant to youth including:

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| ● Sexual Consent | ● Bail Process | ● Education Laws |
| ● Cannabis Law | ● Youth Court Process | ● Police Contact Rights |
| ● Leaving Home Rights | ● Mental Health Care | ● Human Rights in Ontario |
| ● Sexual Consent | ● Young People Without Immigration Status | |

The comics were ready for use and distribution at JFCY. The anticipated impacts of the current project were to 1) promote community engagement and 2) raise public awareness on youth justice issues through the use of social media. As a growing legal document, the comic will be updated as necessary with new legal content by future volunteers.

In regards to community engagement outcomes, we were able to establish new and maintain a current partnership with other seven non-profit organizations that work with youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Although there was no immediate outcome, we anticipated this partnership would be critical in the long term as it would facilitate legal service accessibility for youth who are facing conflicts with the law. Additionally, we were able to get contact information of the defense counsels of three cities within Ontario to invite them to participate in the study which would enhance our understanding of the court diversion process. The anticipated long-term outcome of this project is to bring about better programming for court workers and justice-involved youth.

Lastly, through participation in the court process and community center drop-in, I gained practical knowledge on the impacts of law and research on justice-involved youth. This experience helped me identify areas of research that I would be interested in exploring further to help address the gap between research and practice.

Leadership Skills and SMART Goals :

Relationship Building: I demonstrated a strong aptitude for getting along with others, interacting and working with a wide variety of people, from my project partner, to staff lawyers within the organization, to court workers of other NGOs, to justice-involved youth at local community centers. I developed the ability to connect and communicate well with different groups and individuals, fostering cooperation among the group.

- **Specific:**
 - Establish and maintain new partnerships with NGOs working with homeless youth in Toronto through community outreach via email and phone calls.

- **Measurable:**
 - We can measure the effectiveness of our outreach activity through the response rate of the partnered NGOs. We were able to achieve an estimated 60% engagement rate as 10 out of 17 NGOs and 3 out of 5 court workers responded affirmatively to our inquiry.
 - Although this rate was lower than what we were hoping for, we believe it might be due to cases overload following the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a shortage of staff throughout the summer months.

- **Attainable:**
 - This is achievable because we believe other NGOs would be equally motivated to establish this partnership as it would help their clients.
 - Additionally, my mentor was experienced in community outreach activities and thus, her guidance helped me to make our goal more achievable.

- **Relevant:**
 - This project helped address the lack of accessibility to legal services that youth experiencing homelessness faced.

- **Timely:**
 - There were some delays in getting the responses from our partnered NGOs. However, this was expected and remained within our project timeframe.

Problem Solving: A part of my project involved identifying the knowledge gap that affects justice-involved youth (lack of accessible legal material) and proposing a creative solution that addresses this issue. I learned how to solve problems effectively in group settings by working collaboratively with my partner. This approach to leadership helps my team to be more skilled and effective.

- **Specific:**
 - Brainstorm, create and publish an educational comic book on legal topics that are relevant to youth aged 12-18.

- **Measurable:**
 - Produce a complete, visually compelling comic book with 11 stories on a variety of legal topics. The comic was fact-checked by the staff lawyers and law students at JFCY.
 - Received positive feedback from other staff and students, complementing the creativity of the idea and how informative the comic book was.
 - The comic book was ready for print and circulation at JFCY!

- **Attainable:**
 - This is achievable because both my partner and I have used Canva before to create digital arts. Additionally, we had all the legal materials (JFCY's website and pamphlet) that we needed to convert into a comic book.
 - Additionally, we also had support from staff lawyers at JFCY in case we were unclear about any of the legal information.

- **Relevant:**
 - This project helped to address the knowledge gap by allowing legal information to be more accessible for youth. Their understanding of legal rights is necessary to help them navigate the legal system.

- **Timely:**
 - As my partner and I were the only two people working on this project, we coordinated our time well and therefore, the project was completed on time without any delay.

Learning: I was eager to learn from people that I worked with. I enjoyed picking up new skills and knowledge -- whether it's an objective fact about the court process or subjective experience from a justice-involved youth -- as I believe a good leader needs to learn before they lead. Additionally, I felt compelled to share the knowledge that I gained through my experience with others to promote collaboration and increase understanding.

- **Specific:**
 - Attend a variety of social and professional events available at JFCY, including shadowing Zoom court and in-person drop-in events at a local community center.

- **Measurable:**
 - Interviewing staff lawyers, students, and youth at a community center to learn more about their experience
 - Share their stories back with our group during the weekly meeting

- **Atteninable:**
 - This is achievable because I have experienced reaching out to people -- virtually and in person -- as a former undergraduate ambassador at UofT.

- **Relevant:**
 - This project helped me to gain a better understanding of people's subjective experiences in the legal field. This would allow me to identify areas in which I am interested in conducting further research!

- **Timely:**
 - The schedule was mutually agreed upon and therefore, it was suitable for everyone's timeframe.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation and the U of T Laidlaw Scholars Program for your generous support in building the next generation of ethical leaders who can make meaningful impacts in their community. Your guidance and support throughout my two-years-journey as a Laidlaw Scholar has allowed me to gain truly amazing experience. Additionally, I would like to thank the Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY) for giving me the incredible opportunity to learn about the field of youth justice.