



# Summit House

## Placement Description

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A day program that assists people with mental illnesses to work on recovery goals. Provides a setting to enhance mental and physical well-being and social supports.

## Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

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- Involvement in daily work units (clerical, kitchen, and maintenance)
- Individual work with participants (supportive counseling, assistance with vocational goals)
- Orientation of new members
- Assisting with social programs
- Leading or co-leading afternoon educational programs
- Attending program planning meetings

## Contact Information

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**Read about students' experiences at this site below:**



***Fall 2016 - Ashley Ahlers***

My fall field placement site was at Summit House, located on Pear Street in Harrisonburg. The mission statement of Summit House is to “provide a self-help rehabilitation setting where persons who have experienced mental illness can work on recovery goals and give and receive support from peers.” Summit House is a center for social rehabilitation, also called community rehabilitation and psychosocial rehabilitation. Social rehabilitation embodies the idea that people who have a mental illness can enhance their day-to-day coping through positive interactions with the environment and the community around them. When people are discharged from psychiatric hospitals they often have nowhere to go, and nowhere to practice the skills they learned in the hospital. Isolation is a huge predictor of relapse, and these people often end up back in the hospital sooner or later when their symptoms begin to reappear. Summit House and other clubhouses across America provide a variety of tools for these individuals: a place to go, a support system from staff and other members, opportunities to work and feel productive, and a variety of workshops/activities to practice coping skills. In addition to these workshops, weekly “social programs” are offered: opportunities for members to get out into the community. Examples of these social programs include going to Virginia Beach, going to the farmer’s market, going on a hike, and going to the local high school’s volleyball games. All workshops, social programs, and opportunities to work are entirely optional for members. They choose what they will and will not participate in.

My experience at Summit House was very flexible and entirely up to me to decide what I wanted to do on a daily basis. Each day I went around to each staff member and asked if there was any particular activity or assignment they wanted to help with, to lighten their caseload and work they had to do for the day. Due to this, my day-to-day experience varied: sometimes I would help set up/clean up an activity; sometimes I helped cook the lunch or answer phones; sometimes I helped a staff member with an errand; and in my downtime, I talked to members and got to know more about them and their stories. Members there suffer from a wide range of mental illnesses, and they are very open and willing to talk about them. In addition to these smaller tasks, I led group workshops twice a week. On Mondays I led a self-esteem workshop, and on Fridays I led an art therapy workshop. Each week I introduced a different topic relating to self-esteem, and allowed the members to talk and discuss from there. For art therapy I also chose a certain topic/assignment, provided the art materials, and let the members interpret my assignment in their artwork. For example, one week I had the members draw an outline of their profiles and fill in their profiles with things that they love and make up who they are. They could fill it in with magazine pictures, drawings, collages, etc. The purpose behind art therapy is to engage the mind in the present moment through creativity.

I really enjoyed my time at Summit House. The location is great because it’s right in Harrisonburg, so there wasn’t a long commute; in addition, Summit House is open on weekends, holidays, and some nights, so there are plenty of opportunities to get hours in. The less structured nature of this internship is something that can be an advantage or disadvantage, depending on what type of student you are and how you work. At first I experienced some difficulty because I was expecting more direction and supervision. However, I quickly adjusted, and due to this I



strongly grew in my ability to work independently, something that will benefit me as a future professional. So while this flexibility was something I disliked at first, it ended up being one of my favorite things about the site. My supervisor, Lisa Bange, was great. She is incredibly knowledgeable in the field, and she was never afraid to give me constructive criticism in areas she knew I could do better in. She was out often this semester due to family and health problems, but this gave me an opportunity to step up and help out around the House to make up for her absence. I was also able to get close to and work with other staff members, and they were very open and willing to let me work with them. One thing I disliked was that there was quite a bit of down time in my days, when there was no activity or group to help with. I used this time to talk to members or simply observe, but this made the days seem to go by a bit slower as I was working towards my 150 hours. But overall, I learned an incredible amount at Summit House this semester and gained great experience that will aid me in graduate school and the working world.

I learned two important things at my site this semester: how to break my own stereotypes, and how to positively interact with people who suffer from mental illness. Learning about mental illness in a textbook is so different from what the mental illness looks like in real life. I had mental pictures in my head about what each of these disorders would look like, and these pictures didn't even nearly match the people I ended up meeting. Stereotypes about a mental illness hinder being able to actually understand a person who has it, because the same mental illness looks different in everyone. In addition to this, I learned how to positively interact with the members of Summit House. Interacting with people who suffer from mental illness was something I was not used to doing, and I learned how to treat them with gentleness and compassion while also not treating them like they are children, or somehow "below" me. These two lessons were very important for me to learn, as I want to be an LPC in the future and I will have to interact with sufferers of mental illness daily. I've always wanted to be an LPC, so my experience didn't change that. But this experience did help me realize I never want to go on to get my Ph.D. and be a psychiatrist. Counseling people with depression, PTSD, anxiety, and eating disorders is more of the right profession for me.

Overall, my semester at Summit House was an incredible experience, opportunity to learn, and great chance to make connections and do my part for the Harrisonburg community. I will continue to visit Summit House long after this semester is over to maintain the connections I have made.