



Victim Witness Program

Placement Description

Provides support to crime victims

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- Making phone calls to let witnesses and victims know of status
- Drafting correspondence
- Sending information to all parties
- Sitting in on intakes/learning how to do intakes
- Attend court to provide support to witnesses
- Assistance with statistical input for Victim Witness main database
- Observe trials and various other court hearings

Contact Information

- Contact Person: Nicole Terrell
- Address: Commonwealth Attorney's Office 53 Court Square, Suite 210 Harrisonburg, VA 22801
- Telephone: 540/564-3350
- Fax: 540/433-9161
- E-Mail: nterrell@rockinghamcountyva.gov
- Website: http://rockca.net/victimwitness_services.htm

Read about students' experiences at this site:



Fall 2016 - Madeline Palkovitz

The Victim Witness Program (VWP) is a non-profit organization that is housed in the Commonwealth Attorney's Office in downtown Harrisonburg. Its mission is to "reduce any trauma or confusion that the victim/witness of a crime may be subject to while involved in the criminal justice proceedings by explaining the process and providing additional services." The Victim Witness Program mainly assists victims who are attempting to obtain a protective order, and individuals going through the legal process who are victims of criminal charges. They serve victims from Rockingham County and Harrisonburg City of all age, gender, and race. These individuals can range from having been married to their offender for many years, to not even knowing their offender. The Victim Witness Program is made up of a Director, Assistant Director, Victim/Witness Advocate, and Domestic Violence Coordinator. Although each of these individuals mostly work with a specific gender or age group, they all offer the same services to victims.

I am exceedingly grateful for my experience at the Victim Witness Program. My first day I was given a tour and introduced to all of the VWP workers, attorneys, paralegals, and the judge. I remember feeling slightly out of place when they asked what I was studying in college and I replied "Psychology." This feeling became more pronounced when I sat in Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court after the tour and could hardly understand the terms being said and what was happening. Thankfully, this feeling did not last long due to the hands-on experience I was quickly given. My supervisors Magina and Kim did a great job of gradually immersing me into their program. In the beginning, I accompanied Magina or Kim when they met with a victim seeking a protective order. I observed the appropriate way to act, questions to ask, and information to give to victims. After some time, Magina and Kim allowed me to facilitate the conversation with victims while they were present, so they were able to help me if I had a question or did not know how to handle a situation. Once they felt that I had acquired the knowledge and skills, I was able to perform information intakes for victims by myself. This process entails meeting the victims, getting their contact information, and finding out the details of the situation that occurred to make them seek a protective order before they went in front of the judge. I was there for support and to prepare them for what to expect in court. When they were called before the judge, I accompanied them to help alleviate their anxiety. Once finished, I would explain the outcome, and any additional steps they needed to they. Having the opportunity to help victims escape and start their process of healing was incredibly humbling. On Thursdays, I spent a full day in Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, which I really enjoyed. I observed the first appearances in the morning, followed by protective order hearings, followed by trials. Typically, I knew what types of cases I would see because I often created and organized the docket for office-use. When I went to my site but did not attend court, there were many other things around the office for me to do. I often made initial contact with victims through phone calls or letters to offer our services. I also called victims regarding updates on their cases. Sometimes when criminal charges were pending, I would attend meetings between victims and the prosecutor to determine how the trial might progress. I also entered information into the client/case management computer systems. Thanks to my field placement site, I fully understand



the process of obtaining a protective order, have a much better understanding of our court system, and know how to help victims through the process of escaping.

In my opinion, the advantages of this site completely outweighed the disadvantages. I could not be more appreciative of the staff at the Commonwealth Attorney's Office and the Victim Witness Program. My supervisors, Magina and Kim, were two of the most accommodating people, and they truly wanted to help me learn and grow. They were very patient with me when I asked many questions, and gave me the perfect amount of responsibility. This site is perfect for people who like routine but also may become bored doing the same thing every day. The underlying process followed is typically consistent, but because every victim had a different story and different circumstances, I never lost interest or engagement. Another advantage of this site is being able to make connections with the judge, prosecutors, and police officers that work at the courthouse. Interacting with these people on a daily basis made me feel much more comfortable with law enforcement and the court system. Observing court was one of my favorite aspects of this internship because it was extremely interesting, and it made me realize how much I previously did not know about our judicial system. Sometimes I found it to be emotionally challenging when I felt that the judge's sentencing was not fair. I also had a hard time when a victim would come in to drop a protective order or would choose to dismiss it at the permanent protective order hearing. It was frustrating when victims, especially ones I had previously worked with, did not follow through with the process. This was hard for me to accept because I was aware of the horrible situations they faced, and was worried that they were coerced by their abusive partners to drop their protective order. I could see a disadvantage of this site being that there is not as much psychological work as other field placement sites; however, I did not find this to be a problem because I was given the opportunity to constantly support victims. I truly enjoyed helping victims escape their undesirable situations and knowing that I made a difference in their lives empowered me.

At VWP, I learned how to support and work with victims of many different types of offenses. I also learned of the many resources available to help these individuals. The knowledge I gained from my site is particularly applicable to daily life. My newly acquired knowledge from my site experience allowed me to be a huge support system to a close friend that is currently facing relationship abuse. She told me that unlike others she had talked to, I acknowledged that there are many more factors than what meets the eye that contribute to victims having trouble escaping abusive relationships. She felt understood by me, and I made sure to not victim-blame.

Prior to my field placement I was considering attending law school, but I have since ruled out that career path. Time at VWP has confirmed my interest in the court system, but it has made me more passionate about helping victims. Although I am still unsure of my career path, I am certain that I want to serve a supportive role in a helping field. The Victim Witness Program is an amazing site because it has given me the opportunity to make a huge difference in individuals' lives. Victims need support when escaping unfavorable situations and VWP answers their cries for help. This site has the power to make or break someone and ensure their welfare and safety.



Spring 2016 – Tiffany Palmer

The domestic violence coordinator of the Victim/Witness program for Harrisonburg/Rockingham County goal is to help domestic violence victims through the process of the obtaining protective orders and supports them as they go through the criminal process. The victim/witness advocate's job is to provide information and support to victims of crimes. The domestic violence position focuses on women who have been victim of assault and battery by a family or household member. Victims of domestic violence survive in a complex environment of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. It is the job of the victim witness advocate to help a victim through the process and connect them to services that they may need. The advocate helps aid the victims through the process of getting protective orders and going in front of the judge. Being an intern, you have the same responsibilities to the victims that come to the office.

In my time at the victim/witness program I was able to interview victims to collect information about the victim and the issues they have experienced before they went before the judge for a protective order. I also escorted victims to court and sat with them if they needed me to. I did filling in the office and worked on projects for the attorneys. As with any intern position there is filling and paperwork that take up a lot of time at the site. The office work was not just filing but also helping attorneys sort out evidence and pulling case files discovery motions. I was also able to make connections with other lawyers, the judges, and the sheriff deputies.

Getting to help victims was extremely rewarding. As an advocate we get the chance to make set the victims up for a successful separation from their abusers. The legal system has ways of helping victims of any crime, this is typically done with restitution, or payments for damages. With the domestic violence program, there can be this type of help needed but the most work we do is to help the victim know that they are not alone and that the legal system is looking out for them as long as they take the initiative. If the victim does not want to go through with the criminal charge they are still required to base on policy. This can be a difficult concept for victims to understand so a key in the advocates job is assuring victims that is it better for them to go through the process then to lie and face the possibility of jail time. The protective order is something the victim has complete control over. This control can be essential for showing a victim that they have the ability to take control of their situation. The psychological abuse these victims experience can twist the way they think of their abusers. As advocates, we are not there to give them counseling, but we are there to listen and talk to them about their options. Thursdays are the main day you need to be in the office because that is the day the domestic violence cases are heard in court. Every day is different and you can never really know how a day in court will go. The other cases that are happening in court are typically very interesting.

A frustrating part of the position was having to work with victims who did not want to go through with the process and would return to their abusers. This position does not have as much active psychological work as other placements but this position will give you a unique



perspective of the judicial system. If court is not something you are interested, this may not be the best placement for you.

The office is full of wonderful people that are willing to help you find your way around the office. The lawyers and other advocates are happy to answer questions and explain things you may not understand.

I am going to law school and this placement has allowed me to log a lot of court time to observe other lawyers and get to see how they handle cases. Every case is different, every day in court is different, and every victim is different. No day is the same experience as the day before which makes this placement very interesting. There is some down time in this position, some days are slower than the other days. I learned how to be comfortable talking to victims and interacting with members of the legal community. I have also learned how to operate within an office setting.

If you are thinking of going into law this is a great placement to get firsthand experience with the inside of a courtroom. This is not a placement for you if you want firsthand experience with the psychological side. There is very little psychological work involved in this placement but if you are Justice Studies and Psychology double major or a criminal justice minor then this is a great placement for you. Unless you want to go into forensic psychology, then Western State would be a better fit.

Overall I enjoyed every minute of my time with the victim/witness program and the experience really solidified by understanding of domestic violence victims in a way that classes alone could not provide. I plan to take the things I have learned this semester and continue to work towards helping other victims and to work to improve the legal systems ability to help domestic violence victims and better handle the offenders of such crimes. I also hope field placement students will continue to choose the victim/witness program because it is such a rewarding placement to be put in. I defiantly encourage anyone on the fence about doing field placement to consider the opportunity because no matter where you are placed, you will have an experience that will not regret. The field placement class is a great opportunity to take what you have learned over the last three years and apply it to the real world in ways that you cannot get in any class.

Fall 2015 - Mariah Longmore

The Victim Witness Program's mission is "to reduce any trauma or confusion that the victim or witness of a crime may be subject to while involved in the criminal justice proceedings by explaining the process and providing additional services." One of the most important services that the agency provides is offering the victim emotional support during a protective order hearing. The Domestic Violence Coordinator stands between the victim and the offender during the hearing, so the victim does not have to interact with her abuser in any way. The Victim Witness Program is housed in the Commonwealth Attorney's Office in downtown Harrisonburg,



and it advises victims on what to expect during the court process and clears up misunderstandings that victims may have in moving forward with a protective order. It also can recommend services that victims may utilize if they feel that they need further help. These services can include counseling services, halfway houses, or child support services. This was an excellent site for my field placement experience.

I had typical intern work, like unstapling old files that my supervisor would scan to the court's file database eventually. I also spent a good bit of time filing closed misdemeanor, felony, juvenile, and probation violation cases. This was tedious at times, but I expected this kind of work, as this was an internship. Regardless, I was given many opportunities to further my knowledge of the legal system. For example, I attended court on a weekly basis. The judge presided over the court's docket, or schedule, on Thursdays and protective order hearings were typically on Friday. I preferred to attend protective order hearings because these tended to be more interesting. The victim gave her account of the incident and the abuser's interpretation followed. The judge would then give his verdict on the protective order. These hearings were sporadic, so I was in court for about thirty minutes on Fridays. On Thursdays, however, I spent a few hours in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations courtroom. Most of these cases were first appearances, meaning that their purpose was to assign the offender an attorney and schedule a future trial date. The first appearances typically involved assault and battery charges as well as probation violations. My most memorable experiences were meeting with victims.

As a victim advocate, I was a pillar of support to validate the strength of the victim for stepping away from a physically and psychologically abusive relationship. The most rewarding experiences were seeing a permanent protective order – which is extended for a period of two years – granted against an abuser who clearly did not care about the victim. For example, some abusers would look condescendingly at the victims throughout the hearing, even though they were supposed to focus on the judge the entire time. It was a relief to see that these men would not be able to terrorize their victims any longer. The victim could finally begin her recovery from this abuse that caused her pain for too long. Interning at the Victim Witness Program was a wonderful experience.

I was immersed in the legal system this semester, which was more than I could have hoped for in my first internship. I was grateful to be given the opportunity to interact with victims, and although filing became monotonous at times, I do not regret choosing this site. I do wish that I had asked for more opportunities to work directly with attorneys, for example, while I worked here. This was the main piece of advice that I was given before beginning field placement at the beginning of the semester. Regardless, I will leave with many memories of this internship.

One of the things I liked most about working at the Victim Witness Program was my supervisor, Magina Melenciano. She is one of the warmest and most welcoming people that I have ever met. She helped me with any questions that I had – even when I had to ask them multiple times throughout the semester. She was extremely flexible with my schedule and even insisted on sharing her lunch, even after I said that I was waiting to get back to campus for lunch. Magina says that she considers her interns her “adopted children” and that even after I have



finished my hours; I am welcome to call her for anything. My other supervisor, Nicole Terrell, was extremely friendly and helpful too and I wish that I had been able to work with her as closely as I did with Magina. Both of them made this experience extremely enjoyable.

I was ecstatic to be given the opportunity to work at the Victim Witness Program this semester. I am a Criminal Justice and Psychology double major and knew that I wanted a career that integrated the two majors, but I was not quite sure of what I wanted to do with them. I have never felt more passionate about my work than I did while interning here and observing the interaction of the victim advocates, attorneys, and judges. One of the most important insights that I learned while working here came from a fellow intern, Lisa.

I told her about my apprehensions for potentially applying for law school because I have never been good at arguing and thus do not trust myself to argue for someone either to be sentenced to jail, or to get out of a jail sentence. In response, Lisa told me that law school would teach me to argue. This was such simple and seemingly obvious advice, but I had never thought of it in that particular way. I thought that since I was not adequate at arguing, I had no hope of succeeding in law school. Her advice made me step back and reconsider law school.

Although I do not know if want to be a lawyer, this advice as well as my field placement experience (and my math score on the GRE) made me consider law school, a potentially very different career path, more seriously than I ever have before. I am extremely grateful to have had the chance to work with such inspiring people and in such an enlightening environment this semester. The knowledge that I now have in the legal system has made me feel more equipped to work in the legal field, or even to apply to law school in the future.

Spring 2015 – Caroline Morris

The Victim Witness Program is an organization that strives to reduce any trauma or confusion that the victim/witness of a crime may be subject to while involved in the criminal justice proceedings by explaining the process and providing additional services to all persons in Rockingham County and Harrisonburg City. The victim witness office is made up of three coordinators who perform an array of duties, including preparing all victims and witnesses for the court days, attending court with the victim and explaining any dispositions from the court that apply to that victim/witness's particular case. Along with this, the Victim Witness Program works closely with those in the community who are seeking out a protective order, by advising them of the protective order process, attending court with them and referring them to any additional services they may find helpful in their situation.

My duties while I was an intern varied depending on the day that I was present and the workload that my supervisors had at the time. Typical days would include opening and reviewing new cases where a victim was involved, this included identifying the relationship between the victim and the offender, documenting any injuries sustained from the altercation, describing the disposition that the victim would like to see come out of the case and determining whether or not a protective order should be issued given the circumstances. Every time the



domestic violence coordinator in the Victim Witness Program works with a victim, I would fill out a Victim Stat Sheet, which is used to document the demographics of the victim and offender and is necessary for the grant funding that our office receives. I would also assist my supervisor in creating the docket for the court cases that were heard in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court on Thursday mornings and afternoons, by creating an excel spreadsheet that included defendant names, charges, prosecutors, witnesses, and defense attorneys information.

My favorite aspect of my internship was the time I spent doing court observations in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courtroom. Depending on the day of the week the types of cases that were heard in this court differed, but everyday was an excellent opportunity to learn about the court processes. On Thursdays, the judge heard the cases that I specifically worked on with the Victim Witness Program, which was incredibly interesting to see the work you had been doing applied to this setting.

I believe that one of the reasons I enjoyed this field placement as much as I did, was the work that I was able to do with the victims and witnesses themselves. Some of the women that I worked with were scared, frustrated, or confused by what was going on in their lives, and my ability to offer them support and comfort was an incredibly rewarding experience for me. Along with this, as I mentioned earlier I thoroughly enjoyed court observations specifically on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. I found myself following cases during my time with this office and being impacted by some of the outcomes of the cases.

I knew coming into this field placement that I wanted to go to law school, and this site helped me solidify that choice. Everyday that I was in the office or in the courtroom I was retaining invaluable knowledge about the judicial process that I am confident I will be able to apply to my future career. I learned a tremendous amount about the stages of court proceedings, what is necessary to prove a crime has been committed and what each person's role is in the courtroom given their job title. Each and every aspect is critical to any attorney's career and I feel lucky to have had this exposure.

I believe that this field placement site would be best suited for someone who intended to work in the criminal justice field in some way. Whether it is as an attorney, criminal psychologist, or any other career choice, I believe that a student would get the most out of this experience if they were interested in pursuing a career that related to the judicial process. I also want to point out that you will get the most out of this field placement by seeking out opportunities. There is always someone in the office who could use your assistance, so I recommend to anyone who is an intern in this office to go and ask the attorneys or paralegals if they know of any projects or interesting cases on the docket that week. Overall, this placement offers an incredible learning experience and I would highly recommend it.

Fall 2014 – Maddie Bernstein

The Victim Witness Center aims to aid victims and witnesses of domestic violence in the Rockingham County and Harrisonburg City regions. Essentially, when an individual experiences domestic violence in these regions, and either calls the police, or presses charges themselves, they are sent to the victim witness center to be prepped for their court dates, and referred to any other resources in the area that may be of help to them (such as counseling, women's shelters,



etc.). Additionally, any time someone files for a protective order against another individual in these regions, they are automatically sent to the victim witness center to be advised of their next steps within the court process. Victim Witness coordinators also attend court on protective order days, or when certain victim's cases are on the docket in order to provide moral support, and to help explain to the victim or witness what the court proceedings mean.

Generally, my internship at this site consisted of opening new cases, and providing moral support to victims awaiting their court case. For example, when a new domestic violence case comes into the Commonwealth Attorney's office, it would be my job to go through the police report and the existing file, and find out information such as: what happened on the day/time of the incident at hand, is there any history of abuse, what does the victim want the results of the trial to be, is there any protective order issued/does the victim want one to be, were there any physical injuries/medical bills, and were there any children involved. I would compile all of this information onto one sheet that is easily accessible for when we are in court and need to know certain information about the case at hand.

Also, when new files are opened, I would fill out a VSTOP grant sheet. This is basically a victim statistics sheet that we have to fill out for every case that comes through the Victim Witness program. Then we send the quarterly statistics into the VSTOP program, and they give the office grant money to continue the program. When the office was slow, I would organize files and help the paralegals with their research. It was really interesting to be able to read through old case files—especially considering the caliber of cases that the Commonwealth Attorney generally deals with.

On certain days of the week, I would go to court to assist with protective order hearings. Often times, the women that we assist were extremely emotional or scared or confused and just needed someone to be with them and explain the process to them. So I would sit in the victim witness room with them and talk to them about court proceedings, while trying to assure them that things would be all right, and they were doing the right thing by testifying or pressing charges.

This was one of the things I really enjoyed about the site. I liked having one on one interactions with victims and witnesses, because it really allowed me to utilize some of the skills I have learned in my psychology classes over the past couple of years. Also, I really enjoyed sitting in court. Although it may sound boring, it was quite interesting to be able to watch court proceedings. While I do have experience working with offenders and defendants, I was never able to experience the court end of things, so I feel like this really has rounded out my experiences, and viewpoint of the justice system.

One thing that I was not too fond of was that my supervisor sometimes didn't have enough work to share with me. I wish I had more chances to work with other employees in the Commonwealth Attorney's office, and experience more aspects of the job. That being said, I think that maybe I just needed to be a bit more proactive and ask around the office if anyone



needed help. After hearing about how much responsibility some other students in the field placement class were given at their sites, I definitely wish I could have been given more at mine.

Being at this site has made me think a lot about what I want to do after graduation. I have kind of been in exploration mode, and not really set on anything regarding career goals or further schooling. However, this site has made me really consider the idea of law school, and I think it could be something that I look more into in the near future. Also, I have been toying with the idea of doing research or clinical psychology, but this site has pretty much solidified my feeling that I do not want to do that anymore. I know now that I want to be in a career that has something new to offer me every day, while I can still give my time to help those in my community and give back what I can. I feel like my goals have narrowed a bit, which is one of the major things I was looking to get out of Field Placement. Additionally, I know that I have made so many contacts and connections with people in the courthouse as well as in the Commonwealth Attorney's office—any of which may help me find a job in the future. This placement has opened me up to a new aspect of the judicial system, and I am now all the more curious to investigate more, and search out any other opportunities it has to offer me.