



# Blue Ridge Legal Services

## Placement Description

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Students who participate in the Internship Program at Blue Ridge Legal Services are trained and treated as paralegals in a law firm. They must learn to handle the Intake System, open and close cases, communicate with clients and professionals, and work with our entire staff. The interns learn everything that happens here is for the benefit of our clients.

## Responsibilities

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- Complete applications and eligibility sheets for applicants
- Determine financial eligibility for clients
- Help to determine if a client's case fits within BRLS priorities
- Learn how to organize a case file and make notations on the activity sheet
- Call clients and professionals regarding the facts of the case
- Learn to write letters, open and close cases
- Work closely with Pro Bono Coordinator to refer and monitor cases
- Be responsible to all the staff regarding client assistance

## Contact Information

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- Contact Person: Beth D. Wimer (Legal Secretary/ Co. Vol. Coordinator)
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**Read about students' experiences at this site below:**



***Fall 2019 – Riquoa Robinson***

For my Field Placement experience, I had the opportunity to intern for 150 hours at Blue Ridge Legal Services in the Harrisonburg office. This organization is a nonprofit civil legal aid program to individuals who qualify based on their financial standing, usually below the federal poverty level. During my experience, I was able to be a hands-on asset by assisting with weekly intake of new clients, working alongside attorneys, and being able to observe their work. A great advantage from this experience was the opportunity to work so closely with attorneys to gain personal connections with clients and have a deeper understanding of the legal processes at hand. The micromanagement of the organization allowed me to explore and excel in the work opportunities that I was given. The opportunities to work alongside these attorneys allowed for me to fully understand my long-term career goals of pursuing a career as a lawyer. These attorneys provided quality of services to their clients and reassured why I aspire to be a lawyer. BRLS is nonprofit and does not work to achieve goals based on the amount of pay they receive but simply to help individuals who have no other source. These goals of the attorneys allowed me to solidify my future plans. I was also granted access to assist with the Health Care Navigator during Open Enrollment which allowed me to gain knowledge of a field that required more knowledge and understanding from the community. Through this, I created my Contribution Project to reach out to individuals who enter BRLS and other community outreach centers to educate individuals on their options for Health Care to cover their mental health and health care needs. Through this, I hoped to reach young adults in the community.

Blue Ridge Legal Services is a nonprofit altruistic civil legal aid program that provides free legal assistance to low-income residents of the Shenandoah Valley. Their mission statement is as follows, “Blue Ridge Legal Services, Inc. is a nonprofit charitable civil legal aid program providing free legal assistance in civil matters of critical importance to low-income residents of the Shenandoah Valley and Roanoke Valley.” The organization is providing free legal assistance to individuals who qualify on an income basis in regard to the civil justice system. My experience at the site has been an exceptional opportunity and the involvement I have been allowed to gain access too.

While at Blue Ridge Legal Services, I have had the opportunity to jump fully in with attorneys and paralegals. The first couple of weeks of training was to prepare me for a semester of many experiences. I had the opportunity to assist the legal secretary and paralegal with answering the phones for their weekly intake for potential clients at Blue Ridge Legal Services. I also had the opportunity to complete assignments that attorneys felt comfortable having me do. These included case affidavits for No Fault Divorces, faxing information to organizations, calling clients to update them on their cases, and organizing case files. All of these tasks were a great responsibility and required time and effort. I also sat in on weekly Case Acceptance where attorneys discussed amongst one another their cases for the week. This time was a great learning opportunity of the legal terms and processes. During this time attorneys offered one another advice and suggestions to legal problems that clients had. The second half of my experience at Blue Ridge Legal Services I was granted the opportunity to work alongside the elderly service



attorney. During this time, I was able to go into close detail of her cases, helping her complete tasks to close out cases for the year, and meeting with clients to finish and proceed with any necessary steps. This timing was great for learning and experience one-on-one with the attorney and clients for a more personal relationship.

I believe that being able to work alongside this attorney and meet her clients was a great advantage. It felt more like a mentorship because I was able to learn and be included on so many of the cases that the elderly attorney was taking on. Reading case files is a great way to learn about legal processes but having the opportunity to put a name to a face is a step further to really be in the real situation to figure out solutions and empathize with clients. I also believe an advantage for BRLS is the ability to work with independence. When given tasks, I was allowed to work freely, then turn in my work to attorneys for their critique and learn from my mistakes and correct them. I was not the only one in this setting that was micromanaged. The entire Blue Ridge Legal Services Staff is micromanaged, and I believe that is why I enjoyed my supervision and work abilities while at this site.

Being at BRLS I gained many skills. I now know elements of the civil justice system such as No-Fault Divorces, landlord tenant requirements, bankruptcy and especially the most important thing I believe I have gained is knowledge about legal aid. Before this site I was unsure of what legal aid was. I found the work of these attorneys exceptional because they are going above and beyond to offer the best quality of services to indigent individuals for no cost. I aspire to become an attorney one day and a goal I have also desired to reach was to provide quality of service and not just pursue to the career for the financial benefits. BRLS has taught me this and also showed me that it is possible. To see the gratification and the thanks from the clients even if the legal problem is not solved with the goal they had intended, these clients were still satisfied with services and returned because they were treated so well by the attorneys and staff.

### ***Fall 2016 - David Boyd***

Blue Ridge Legal Services (BRLS) is a nonprofit legal aid program that provides free legal assistance to low-income residents in the Shenandoah Valley and surrounding areas. BRLS is committed to eliminating poverty-based inequities in the civil justice system, which includes giving advice and representation to clients in legal matters found more often in low-income communities. These civil cases can include divorce, custody disputes, bankruptcy, landlord-tenant disputes, consumer disputes, and more. In order to receive services, our clients must financially qualify, which means that all of our clients reside in a household that falls beneath 125% of the federal poverty level. The main goal is to create a "level playing field" in the civil justice system by providing these low-income community members with legal assistance they would not be able to pay for otherwise.

During my time here, a large responsibility of mine was answering phones from current or potential clients and local, private attorneys. It was my duty to provide them accurate information about our services, how our application works, and relaying them to the correct staff



member. I also worked closely with my supervisor, Molly Bell, who was the pro bono referral coordinator of the office. She was in charge of delegating some of our cases to the local attorneys to take on a pro bono basis, so there is daily work involved with this for interns. I was in charge of closing these cases, creating case notes for the local attorneys on Family Law Hotline days, and researching court documents for additional information on clients and adverse parties. Additionally, I have also been assigned an assortment of tasks from my supervisor, staff attorneys, and others around the office. These tasks consisted of a variety of short and long term projects that touched on many different aspects of our organization. For example, I created a spreadsheet of private Harrisonburg law firms and organized them by their areas of practice. I also helped a staff attorney on a long-term project by gathering information about local resources that offer classes or training in financial empowerment that we may refer our clients to. Other interns and I also received an opportunity to attend court to observe proceedings that we do not get to see at the office. Overall, there was an abundance of projects and opportunities, large and small, that are available for interns to take part in.

Many of the interns, including myself, had special interests within the organization and the staff takes these into account by giving projects related to a particular interest. It was important to express these interests early so that I was able to take on as many project as possible related to my interests. In particular, I was interested in the lack of private attorneys taking part in pro bono programs, so I received projects related to pro bono work and was even sent articles that were similar to these interests. Another advantage of working at BRLS is becoming more knowledgeable about our civil justice system and common issues that are apparent in certain legal cases. In a combination of talking to clients over the phone, looking over attorney case notes, and sitting in on attorney meetings, I began to understand the important points and questions that arise out of the legal situations that BRLS covers. As an aspiring attorney, this experience is paramount for understanding the methods for navigating civil matters and getting a glimpse of what a career as an attorney is like. One disadvantage, or limitation of BRLS, however, is that only a limited number of types of cases are able to be taken. Even though a lot can be learned from the types of cases that we do take, there is little experience with other types of civil cases or the criminal justice system because they are outside of the scope of legal aid. Though BRLS may not offer a comprehensive view of the entire legal system, the experience is second-to-none with cases dealing with family related legal matters and other poverty-based legal issues.

One of the best parts about my experience at Blue Ridge Legal Services was the atmosphere at the office. Every single one of the staff members are incredibly friendly and very approachable. Most days, you overhear the staff in friendly conversations in the hallways and lots of laughter that cuts through the building, making it a very enjoyable environment to work in. At my time at BRLS, I was lucky enough to be working during all of the office's monthly staff meeting. Every month for an hour, the entire staff would all meet in the conference room over lunch and they invited the interns that were available that day to join. This meeting usually consists of general discussion, some storytelling, and new endeavors the organization and staff



are pursuing, and the interns were always included in the conversation. For example, at the end of the meeting, everyone, including the interns, goes around the room and contributes one-by-one about new projects, interesting topics, or anything at all. As an intern, I really felt welcomed by the staff, which was especially apparent during these meetings.

This experience has been an exceptional stepping stone in my career advancement. Upon entering the program, I was very interested in understanding the day-to-day activities and duties of attorneys and staff of a law office. My time here has not only allowed me to gain this insight and be able to use it with my professional goals, but I have also gained valuable skills that can be used in various other fields outside of law. I have witnessed the process of a civil case from intake over the phone, to meeting with the attorneys, to closing the case to be filed away. I have sat in on case acceptance meetings where our attorneys discuss the best, or most feasible options, for pursuing each of their cases. I have even been to the courts to take my experience to full-circle. Additionally, my communication skills have improved, in person and over the phone, which is applicable to any professions, including law.

Lastly, a valuable take-away from this experience has been understanding the common issues the low-income community faces. Before this internship at BRLS, I had not had much experience in public service, however this experience has truly shown me the hardships people in our own community deal with, sometimes on a daily basis. Over time, just doing my part to help relieve our community members of some of their legal problems was rewarding in of itself. In all, Blue Ridge Legal Services was a fantastic experience for a variety of reasons and I would recommend it to anybody considering law as a possible career choice or anybody that simply wants to make a difference in their community.