



# 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)
- Address: 204 N. High Street, P.O.Box 551, Harrisonburg, VA 22803
- Telephone: (540) 433-1830
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**Read about students' experiences at this site below:**



***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 BLRS 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.

*Spring 2009 – Dana Shifflett*

Blue Ridge Legal Services is a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to providing legal services in civil cases to low-income residents of the Shenandoah Valley and Roanoke Valley of



Virginia. The most common civil matters covered include divorce, domestic violence, bankruptcy, collections, elder issues, and landlord/tenant disputes. Financial eligibility for BRLS services is based primarily on the number of people in the household and the household income. While working at the Harrisonburg Office of BRLS I was responsible for client intake, pro bono case management, and various other tasks as assigned. Every day was an interactive experience that allowed for learning and growth in a number of ways. Some days the majority of my work involved client intake. This included communicating with potential clients via the phone, or in person, about their personal information to complete an application and eligibility form. Other days I worked one-on-one with my supervisor, Janet Ikenberry, on the pro bono case files. Together we maintained the case files, communicated with the clients, and communicated with the private attorneys involved. I had the opportunity to attend a bankruptcy hearing with one of the staff attorneys and sit in on a court case. I also was responsible for answering the phone, writing case closing memorandums, and other administrative duties.

I believe that there were many advantages to working at this particular field placement site. First, and foremost, my communication skills have been greatly enhanced. While working at BRLS I have had the opportunity to speak with private attorneys, professionals from other social agencies, and the clients themselves. However, this would not be an appropriate site for someone who has limited communication skills and writing skills. The main responsibilities require a certain standard to work at BRLS. There is a huge focus on verbally communicating with private attorneys and clients as well as writing correspondence to them.

I have learned a lot during my time at BRLS. As mentioned above my communication and writing skills were constantly challenged and improved upon from the first day to the last day. I dealt with people who were extremely thankful, and others who were terribly upset. I also gained a better understanding of the law in reference to the civil cases covered by BRLS. I became very familiar with a database purchased by the office and utilized it to complete many of my assigned duties. I also learned about the particulars of several cases and the process that the private attorneys employed for reaching the client's goals.

The experience certainly opened my eyes, even more so, to the issues that affect those at or below poverty level in the area. I have previously worked with social programs that assisted lower income clients, but I was unaware of the striking legal problems that affect so many of them. My career path has not changed as a result of interning at BRLS. However, I would say that I am more likely to seek out volunteer options that help the poverty stricken citizens of the area I live in. It has become abundantly clear to me that there is a huge gap between the services offered and the services needed.

I have truly enjoyed my time at BRLS. I would highly recommend it to anyone who is considering law school, motivated to help people, and is a fast learner. I truly felt like my presence at the office was a benefit for the BRLS staff and the BRLS clients as well as for myself. The small office atmosphere provided numerous opportunities to try something new. If there was one particular aspect that was not terribly appealing I had the flexibility to do something else. There is certainly a meticulous process for dealing with clients and their cases.



But once that process is mastered it becomes second nature. Every member of the staff at BRLS is tremendously welcoming and helpful. I would highly recommend this field placement to others.