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# Harrisonburg-Rockingham Social Services District

## Placement Description

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Provides a full range of social services for foster children in the Harrisonburg-Rockingham County area

## Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

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- Social histories
- Make referrals for services for foster children
- Attend and participate in interdisciplinary team meetings, FAPT meetings and court proceedings
- Home visits with biological and foster families
- Assist social workers with placements of children to residential facilities
- Visitation between foster children and biological family
- Compile case history and obtain pertinent information for the placement of children
- Assist foster home coordinator in recruitment and training of foster families
- Provide supportive services to foster and adoptive families

## Contact Information

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



*Fall 2019 – Chase Hoover*

The mission of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Social Services District is the promotion of self-reliance and protection of citizens through a variety of community based services. During my time at this site I was placed in the Foster Care Unit where I had the opportunity to learn and gain a deeper understanding of the current foster care system by shadowing numerous members of the staff. Typically this meant that I had the chance to observe and assist in the facilitation of supervised visits, home visits, Family Assessment Planning Team (FAPT) meetings, and attend mock/real trials involving the children currently placed in-care. Supervised and home visits function as instrumental tools for determining the nature of the family environment throughout a child's stay in foster care. During supervised visits at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Social Services site I would follow case workers as they observed the parent-child interaction behind a glass window, while home visits involved touring the family home to ensure that the conditions were deemed suitable for a child to live or to return home.

Furthermore, I worked closely with many families to assess their situation and help them locate the resources they needed to succeed and have their children returned home. When a child enters Foster Care the initial goal is to always return the child home; this often meant that we had to align parents with counseling programs including marriage, anger management, and/or substance abuse counseling. Throughout the course of this internship I attended a few of these sessions as it is the caseworker's job to ensure that the parents are working and committed to succeeding in these programs. Unfortunately, if the initial goal of return home cannot be satisfied, then I would work with the other caseworkers to help them locate other potential family, residential facilities, or foster care homes for their children to permanently or temporarily be placed. This process is one of the most important aspects of the Foster Care unit because caseworkers are given a timeline in which they must establish a permanency plan for their child.

Although this site provided me with a great opportunity to explore the social work field, I was significantly limited by the fact that I could only commit 150 hours to my internship (a normal social work internship is over 300 hours). Because of this predicament, I was unable to be assigned my own cases which meant that I could not practice many of the essential skills that caseworkers use everyday. As a result, I did not get to learn the online documentation system used by social workers, conduct my own visits/cases, write casefiles, speak at trial, etc. Instead, I was typically assigned a shadowing role which meant that I was there to observe and not lead. Additionally, another disappointing factor involved the fact that a majority of my internship was spent driving from site to site. Since caseworkers can have clients that are over four hours away, a large portion of this internship was spent behind the wheel. Although this is an important part of being a social worker (they are required to visit each of their children once a month), it became frustrating to drive six hours a day to visit a child to then only talk to them for approximately fifteen minutes.

In spite of these disadvantages, my placement at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Social Services site offered me many beneficial experiences. First, I had the chance to work in an office setting with an incredibly knowledgeable and open-minded staff, which was important because it was often up to me to take command and construct my own schedule for the day. This meant that



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it was my responsibility to become familiar with each caseworkers schedule, clients, and daily activities so that when it became time to shadow I would not serve as a liability or hindrance. Being forced to take initiative in an office setting is an important skill and should help transition to any job that I take in the future. Another advantage of interning at this site is that you will never be sitting at a desk or running the same agenda everyday. Instead, each work day feels completely different as you will have the ability to witness home visits, mock trials, court cases, supervised visits, scanning documents, counseling sessions, and that's really just the beginning of the work to be done. The supervisors insist on exposing interns to as much as possible so that each day offers a new and unpredictable experience. The last advantage of this site is the exposure that you will gain from getting to see the various avenues of social work. For example, before this internship I was completely unaware of how the court system operates, but after spending numerous hours preparing and attending trials I now am more knowledgeable which should prove useful because often counselors are forced to participate in their own client's trials.

In the end, I started my placement wanting to learn more about the foster care system as I had worked the previous two summers at a summer camp for troubled youth. At the completion of this internship, I can say that I now have a much deeper and comprehensive understanding of the foster care system. Whereas I do not plan to pursue a career in Social Work, this experience yielded me exposure to multiple avenues of child development which I believe will be incredibly important as I am currently applying to School Counseling master programs. Even though I do not plan on pursuing a Social Work career, I feel this internship is a great preface to a Social Work master's program because it will provide an introduction to what exactly this field involves. Lastly, this is not an easy internship to partake in as you will be exposed to some of the most heartbreaking and troubled children in the Harrisonburg community. However, this serves as one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had the chance to participate in. Protecting and helping powerless youth escape their demons and become healthy contributing members of society is an extraordinary feat that I am grateful to have experienced.

***Spring 2018 – Ciara White***

This semester, I had the pleasure of enjoying my field placement experience at the Harrisonburg Rockingham Social Services District (HRSSD) in the Foster Care Unit. The overall mission of Social Services is “the promotion of self-reliance and protection of citizens through community-based services.” Specifically, the purpose of foster care is to provide “state mandated services that provides a full range of casework, treatment and community services to a child who is abused or neglected.” Foster care was intended to be a temporary solution to familial problems with primary intentions on returning the child back to their family. If reunification isn't achieved, the goal becomes placing the child with an adoptive family because “we believe that children do best when raised in families.” A wide range of services are offered to these children and their families including: counseling and treatment, day care, medical, education, employment, family planning, independent living (for older foster children), housing, respite care, legal, socialization and recreation services. Children come into care by reference of a CHINS (Children in Need of Services) petition or CPS (Child Protective Services). They are placed in a variety of different settings including foster families (regular or therapeutic), group living arrangements, residential



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treatment facilities, with a relative or in an independent living situation based on their needs. As of January 2018, 187 children were in care and those numbers change often.

Everyday at this site is different and unpredictable for everyone. There were plenty of opportunities given to be able to learn more about the site and social work, overall. I spent my time both in the field and in the office. My responsibilities include independent work and a lot of shadowing of the workers. Independently, I completed full disclosure paperwork for children that are changing placements, transported children, supervised visitations between parents and their children and sometimes between siblings and completed small projects such as putting together resource binders for foster parents and workers and other small office duties. For full disclosures, I was required to read through files and compile information that would be necessary for the child's next placement or adoptive home to know about them. Reading through the files and compiling the information was very interesting because it felt like I was putting together pieces of a puzzle to figure out their story. I was trusted with the responsibility to transport children when the workers weren't able to. While transporting them, I was able to get to know the child better and have regular conversations with them to ease their mind. Supervising visitations are cool to witness because I had the opportunity to witness how families interact with each other. Most of the time, children don't understand why they were taken and do miss their parents, so when they see them they are excited.

As far as shadowing, I was able to sit in on home visits, court cases, FAPT (Family Assessment and Planning Team) meetings, school meetings and foster parent trainings. Every home visit was different in terms of age and situations. I've witnessed sad stories and heartwarming stories. There were some foster homes that were deeply involved with the child and wanted the best for them while others either couldn't care for them any longer because of behavioral issues or weren't as involved with the child. During court cases, specifically TPR (Termination of Parental Rights') cases, we would hear the entire story from different parties on both sides of the case from the start of the child's time in care then hear the decision which is important for the child's future. FAPT meetings include professionals from different places in the community that are all interested in helping out the child and their family by providing any services that they feel are necessary. Similarly, workers would visit different school to speak with school officials such as teachers, school counselors, nurses and principals to discuss important topics like IEP's (Individualized Education Program) or other issues. Lastly, foster parent trainings aim to prepare foster parents for their experiences in dealing with children that have been through such significant trauma and any other issues or problems that they may have. During these trainings, I was more so observant of the presentation and had the opportunity to participate in discussions with the future foster parents.

I enjoyed my placement with the foster care unit and I am thankful for the opportunities that I've received while interning here, as well as the connections that I've made. An advantage of this site is the friendly atmosphere that the workers provide. Each worker is faced with cases that can be very traumatic, but nevertheless, they continue to have positive attitudes and friendly smiles every day. They were welcoming and very approachable, so I was able to talk with them or ask them any questions about anything, including future career plans or graduate school. When shadowing the workers, they made sure to fill me in on all of the details about the current case in order to better prepare me to see the clients. One limitation about this site is the amount of downtime that I had. I had flexibility in my schedule and was able to be at this site for most of



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the day for a majority of the week so that I would be able to gain the full experience of this internship. On some days, there would be a lot for me to do in terms of office work or shadowing workers. Other days, I wouldn't have anything assigned for me to do but I could approach different workers and ask them if I could accompany them to different places. However, there were some days where a lot of the workers would be out of the office for training and I wouldn't have anything to do at all. Having an open and flexible schedule would definitely be beneficial for this placement.

Upon entering college, I didn't know if I wanted to pursue social work or counseling as a long-term career. I've learned that a lot of this job does involve counseling because you have to advise the families and children and listen to their problems, often. I also learned that I only need a bachelor's degree to work in this field. Therefore, I decided that I would like to pursue a Master's in counseling and have the option to work in social work in the future. I've learned a lot about how to work with clients and develop trust with them which will be helpful in both fields.

***Spring 2018 – Megan Smith***

My experience in Field Placement was working with the Foster Care Unit, a part of Harrisonburg Rockingham Department of Social Services. This government-run agency seeks to provide help for people who are suffering from many aversive life situations. Foster Care specifically provides care for children dealing with many different forms of neglect and abuse from their parents or caretakers. Their goal is to help these children live better lives and to grow up in a safe home environment with loving authority figures. To achieve this goal Social Workers in Foster Care connect these children and their families to professionals in the community. Families have benefitted from receiving psychiatric evaluation, counseling, drug treatment programs and screening, and many other services that have been provided and paid for through Social Services. Social workers make a service plan and work directly with parents to help them use all services needed so they can be capable to parent. They also recruit and train people in the community to become foster parents for children or place them in group and independent living housing.

While interning with Foster Care I shadowed Social Workers when they would go to court for different hearings about changing a family's goal or terminating a parent's rights to make adoptions available for these children. We visited with foster families and heard how the different placements are going. At these visits Social Workers would talk with parents about adopting foster children or children having to leave their homes. Around the office I would fill out paperwork, make binders, and do other office jobs. Other job duties included transporting children to different therapies or family visits.

Working at my site has been a great experience and helped me grow professionally. This site is important to the community's well-being. Abuse is such a large issue and Foster Care tries to remedy issues surrounding it. The workers at this site try to help as best as they can and together try to think of the best plan to do this. This helps so many people and provides services to them but sometimes does nothing because families do not want to participate in services. It can be a hard job because the things you see children go through are sad. This is also a motivation in working at the site because you can help children to heal and recover from some of the mistreatment. The workers at this site are very busy with large workloads but still remain



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positive. Being in this environment was very enjoyable because the unit worked together as a team. They were always willing to help and support each other. This is so important because you hear a lot of sad stories of kids experiencing maltreatment. Sometimes you do not really see good outcomes from Foster Care working with these children. It was difficult not being able to do a lot to help because I did not have certain clearances to accomplish tasks. Because of this it is important to be proactive in finding tasks to do and talking with workers about how you can help them.

I really enjoyed getting to know the workers of Foster Care. They were very encouraging and easy to relate to. They model well how to interact with people and have difficult conversations. Learning about Foster Care and the system was very interesting. Through reading social histories, psychiatric exams, and other information you understand people better who have experienced abuse. It improved my understanding that issues in families are cyclical and not always what they seem at face value. Parents who have done bad things most of the time are good at heart - just very broken themselves. Having empathy for these people even when they mess up is crucial in helping them change.

Through interning you learn so many valuable skills that can relate to work later on. With parents not doing what is expected to get their children back, social workers have to have a lot of honest and difficult conversations. I learned how to think on my feet by observing these conversations and with social workers talking with foster kids about changing placements. Through these hard conversations it is really important to have patience and not get upset when other people are acting out their emotions towards you. Even with the hard parts of social work it is worth it. The most memorable experiences with interning were seeing children with their foster parents. Many of these children love their foster parents and feel safe in their care. This crucial work is giving children better lives and people to care for them.

Working with Foster Care was a great experience overall and helped me to learn about the needs of the community around JMU. Getting to be a part of this work was exciting and eye opening. This is a really great placement if you are considering social work. It is connected with a lot of other organizations so you get to see a lot of different types of occupations that help meet children's' needs. Interning helped me to see that I want to work with children who have needs that are not being met by their parents. In the future I want to help these children have freedom from the pain they have experience and to be able to live better lives.

***Spring 2015 - Jenna Tempera***

My Field Placement Experience this semester was at Harrisonburg Rockingham County Social Services District (HRSSD) in the Foster Care Department. The mission of Social Services is "the promotion of self-reliance and protection of citizens through community-based services". Foster Care offers a wide range of services to families and children in the City of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. Some of these services include: foster family, residential, or independent living home placements, housing assistance, parent training, intensive home-based services, independent living skills training, respite care services, medical assistance, and therapeutic, mental health and substance abuse counseling. These children come into care by



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being referred to us on a CHINS (Children in Need of Services) petition or by Child Protective Services.

During my time at Harrisonburg Rockingham County Social Services District Foster Care, I was given countless opportunities and experiences I would not have been able to have at other sites. My experiences at this site were never dull and always changing and there was continuously new information to learn. A majority of my time at this site was spent shadowing, attending court, or filling out paperwork. When I was able to shadow workers in the field, we would conduct home visits to foster children or biological parents, transfer foster children to new placements, and attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, Family Partnership meetings, and Virginia Enhanced Maintenance Assessment Tool (VEMAT) meetings. On days spent in the office, I was able to observe supervised visits, fill out home studies for future foster parents, compile information for a full disclosure when a child is about to be adopted, read through case files, fill out applications for foster children when they are going to be transferred to a new residential placement, and other office duties such as copying and filing. Over the course of the semester, I was able to take on some responsibilities on my own and took notes on supervised visits and tried to find potential adoption placements for some long-term foster children.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time spent at this site and I am grateful that I had so many opportunities while I interned there. The many opportunities I was given are definitely one of the major advantages of this site. The workers at HRSSD Foster Care are constantly busy and always doing different things day to day, which gave me the opportunity to do something different every day. Another advantage of this site is the staff members you get to work with. They were extremely open and welcoming to me throughout my time spent at HRSSD Foster Care. The nature of our work can be very difficult and you see and hear things that are not an easy topic for everyone. Having an open and friendly environment at a workplace that deals with this type of population is important. They showed support for each other by going in pairs to homes or environments that they needed support in. The workers were always preparing me for what I was going to see and made sure I knew that I could leave if I found it too hard. Seeing and working in this environment made me realize how important it is to have the support of your coworkers and I now know this is something I want to look for when I am applying to jobs. I did not see many limitations to this site, but one thing I would suggest for individuals looking to complete their Field Placement at this site is to have an open and flexible schedule. There were many days that I ended up staying at the office longer than my assigned hours, simply just to get the experience in. I was fortunate enough to have the entire day open on days I spent at my site, and this gave me the opportunity to extend my hours there. I was able to gain experiences I would not have been able to if I did not have a flexible schedule this semester. In the end I went over the 150 hours required for this placement, but I gained valuable skills that I will be able to use in the future.

When I began working at this site, I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in child welfare or something pertaining to domestic violence. This internship gave me the opportunity to see and learn a wide range of services provided to families and I had the opportunity to be right in the middle of everything. Before this internship, I started to realize that I was more into pursuing a career in social work, but my experiences were limited in the area. Looking back at



my time spent at this site, I now can strongly say that I am prepared to pursue social work and that this is what I am extremely passionate about.

### *Fall 2014 – Kendra Edwards*

My Field Placement this semester was at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Social Services Foster Care Department. Our mission statement is “Our process to continuously improve services for children and families will be rooted in the best of practices, the most accurate and current data available, and with the safety and well-being of children and families as the fixed center of our work.” These services are offered to children in the Harrisonburg-Rockingham community whose general well-being is in danger. Some of our children are referred to us, and others become involved through Child Protective Services. In fact, we provided services to 124 children and their families in 2012, 89 in 2013, and 79 so far this year. These services include placement, independent living skills, mental/physical health treatment, mentoring/tutoring, opportunity for a permanent home, and resources to the actual foster family such as counseling, respite, finances, etc.

There were many great opportunities and experiences that I had at this site. Each day was different for me. Some days, I was able to spend the entire day in the field shadowing workers, and on others I spent my time in the office. When I was able to shadow case workers in the field, we usually visited foster children in their home or school. However, sometimes we went to biological homes or attended court hearings. In addition, I was able to make some visits to foster children on my own or with another intern. In the middle of the semester, I did this the most often, and I’m very thankful for the experience that I got from making visits. We hadn’t had enough familiarity with this field in the beginning of the internship to make visits on our own, and towards the end of the semester we were only allowed to visit those in care who were over the age of 18. When I spent time in the office, I occasionally did some copying and putting binders together, but I also had the opportunity to learn even more about the Foster Care field by reading various case files to become accustomed with the different types of children that this agency helps. In fact, I learned nearly as much by just reading files as I did spending time in the field. The case files that I was able to read had very detailed accounts of what the child had been through and also allowed me to become more familiar with different documents and forms.

I loved interning with this site, and I’m thankful that I did end up choosing Foster Care as my Field Placement. In my opinion, this site has many different advantages. First, the staff members are all very friendly and hard-working people. As a new intern, I was nervous at first about how my interactions with everyone at this site would be. However, I immediately felt completely welcome and everyone that I got the chance to work with was always open to answer my questions and never seemed to get frustrated with me. In addition, the staff members here were not only great with me, but I was impressed with how much compassion they have for clients despite the fact that clients in this type of agency are not always the easiest to deal with.





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Another advantage of this site is the attention and care of the supervisors. They each are very approachable and easy to talk with, even about problems. I have experienced various other workplaces with supervisors who are so intimidating or rude to everyone who works under them that I never felt comfortable talking with them about anything in general. However, I feel that the supervisors at this agency have the perfect balance of authoritativeness and friendliness. My favorite part of interning at this site, aside from all of the great experience I was able to gain, was definitely talking with all of the staff members I got to know. They all were so warm and inviting, and didn't even mind talking with me about questions I had on topics such as graduate school and career advice.

As far as any disadvantages or limitations of this agency, I really had a hard time thinking of any. The only negative thing that I could think of was the fact that this agency does seem to have a tough time with the burn-out rate of case workers, which often brought added stress on the rest of the workers. Although, in my opinion, that is more of an issue that this field has in general, and is not specific to this site. However, I was told that they are addressing this issue and are working very hard to find the best ways to lessen each workers case load as an attempt to decrease this burnout rate.

Going into this internship, I was on the fence about whether I wanted to pursue Counseling Psychology or Social Work. I had recently completed an internship at the Counseling Center, which I thoroughly enjoyed, so I was hoping that by also completing an internship in a Social Services Department I would be able to make a final decision between the two. Luckily, this experience has indeed helped me choose where exactly my passion is, and I've decided that Social Work is what I would like to do. Through this internship, I've learned so much about the child welfare system and helping families in need, which I am incredibly thankful for.