



# Victim Witness Program

## Placement Description

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Provides support to crime victims

## Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

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- 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

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Read about students' experiences at this site:



*Fall 2021 - Grace Johnson*

I had the opportunity to intern at the Harrisonburg/Rockingham County Victim Witness Program (VWP) during the Fall 2021 semester as my introduction to fieldwork experience. The Victim Witness Program is a non-profit organization that is located at the Harrisonburg/Rockingham County General District Court on the second floor. The VWP is overseen by the Office of Commonwealth's Attorney in Harrisonburg, VA. The VWP's mission serves 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." In the VWP, there is the Director, Assistant Director, and Victim/Witness advocates. The VWP oversees and assists victims in General District Court (GDC), Juvenile and Domestic Relation Court (JDR), and Circuit Court. The team works closely with each other and with prosecutors, police/investigators, and even defense attorneys when advocating for their victim in any crime. The VWP team truly makes an impact on the victim/witness during their time in court.

During my internship, I had the opportunity to work primarily with the Assistant Director, Magina Melenciano. Because I was an Intro to Field Work student, I only had to get 80 hours instead of the 150 hours required by field placement. I worked roughly 8 hours a week, in which I spent about 2.5 hours at my site two days a week and 3 hours at my site one day a week. Despite my days being short, I learned so much from my supervisor, Magina, and the rest of the staff at VWP. For the first few weeks, I observed the duties of VWP staff members. I shadowed Magina in GDC and Cindy and Krystal (victim/witness advocates) in JDR. When I shadowed Magina in GDC, I observed her oversee protective orders, traffic cases, and assault and battery cases. When I observed Cindy and Krystal in JDR, I also watched them oversee protective orders and assault and battery cases. Their primary duties were to talk to the victim and receive input from them, provide support to the victim in court, explain the next steps in the process, and provide additional resources. When shadowing a VWP member, I was able to see the impact that they were making on the victim/witness's time in court. I was also able to see the judicial process in action. This was a great opportunity for me to understand how and why our criminal justice functions the way it does. During my shadowing experience, I observed civil procedure hearings, bond hearings, trials, and much more.

Working with the VWP gave me a lot of hands-on experience. During my shadowing experience, my main priority, at the time, was working in the office. I had to copy paper information for Magina's folders, enter information into the Client Information Management System (CIMS), and send out letters to the victim notifying them of their upcoming date and status of their case. After a few weeks of shadowing, Magina allowed me to become more hands-on and handle more responsibility. Before sending me off to work on my own, she assured me that she would be with me every step of the way, and she was open to questions if I had any. She gave me the confidence to step into this role of greater responsibility and take on more work. I had the chance to speak with victims one-on-one, speak to prosecutors about a victim's case, and attend court procedures with the victim/witness. Despite my minimal contribution to the



victim's case, hearing a victim say "thank you" was the most rewarding experience of my internship.

Interning at the Victim Witness Program has been the most rewarding experience of my college career. One of the advantages of working at the VWP is the open and friendly environment. Everyone was welcoming and kind to a 20-year-old college student who had no law experience. The VWP staff members were not only accepting of me, but the prosecutors, defense attorneys, secretaries, judges, and police officers were all welcoming as I became a weekly presence in the courtroom. Despite working in what many may consider to be a serious and particularly hostile environment, the adults that were a part of the court-style life were very kind to me, which made me feel less intimidated. Another advantage to working in the VWP is the impact that you can make on someone's life. Despite working more behind the scenes, I could tell each day that my subtle work had the potential to make a positive impact on someone's time in court. The "thank you" that I got standing next to Magina, Cindy, or Krystal is what made me love this internship so much and what I believe will make others love this internship too. My favorite part of working at VWP was seeing that no two days were alike. Showing up every week was different from the last and the week before. Every day that I worked showed me something new about the criminal justice system and the work of a VWP staff member. No two cases were the same, and no two days working at the VWP were the same. I am extremely grateful for that and the experiences I was able to gain every time I came to work.

Though there are plenty of advantages to working at the VWP, there are some aspects of this internship that may not be suited for everyone. There is a huge emotional aspect to working in this program and attending court. This type of emotional labor can be taken home after a day of court and can stick for a little longer than wanted. Many of the victims with whom I worked went through horrendous things, and it truly takes courage for them to come to court and speak of it. This internship will expose you to the dark side of crime and how it really takes a toll on people mentally, emotionally, and even physically. It is impossible to predict how someone may act in court, and some of their acts may be emotionally triggering. It was also upsetting when a case did not go the way that I wanted. When I attended court, I had to read up on the case file, and at times, I would get a little emotionally attached to the case given the sensitive nature of this work. I rarely left my internship upset or angry, however, I did find myself at times thinking about my work while at home.

Despite the heavy nature that comes with the duties of working at the VWP, I would not change this experience for the world. Magina supported me throughout my time and became a huge part of my enjoyment for this internship. My time working at the VWP helped me grow into who I am as a person. It helped me to become more independent, confident, empathetic, and supportive. I would not have been able to grow into those qualities without Magina and the other staff members of VWP. I not only was able to learn to grow into myself as a person, but also educate myself on our criminal justice system. I am now a more enlightened, educated citizen in understanding how crime is affected and can affect our criminal justice system and our proceedings. Through working at the VWP, I gained a lot of "behind the scenes" knowledge of the effort and time needed for a case. Not only would Magina answer any questions I had, but the prosecutors in the office were very welcoming to answering my questions about procedures in



court and how or why a case went the way it did. Overall, this experience taught me a lot about myself, my capabilities, and our criminal justice system.

After seeing the impact of the work of VWP members, I have decided that I want to pursue a career in the victim assistance field. I originally came to the VWP wanting to pursue a career in studying and analyzing criminal behavior in the FBI. Now, I would like to pursue a career that can make an impact like a victim/witness advocate. I would not have switched my career field if it was not for the VWP and the staff members that have made a lasting impact on me. I now would like to pursue a career in the Victim Assistance department of the FBI. This internship is a step in the right direction for anyone wanting to choose a career in the criminal justice department or advocacy services.

### ***Fall 2019 – Kayla Shaw***

At the Victim Witness Program (VWP), the goal is to reduce any trauma or confusion by explaining the criminal process. They also assist victims by providing services that people are entitled to as a victim or witness of crime. The Commonwealth's Attorney oversees the Victim Witness Program, which is a non-profit organization, located at the Rockingham and Harrisonburg Judicial Center in downtown Harrisonburg. The VWP provides courtroom assistance in General District Court (GDC), Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court (JDR), and in more severe cases Circuit Court. The team that makes up the VWP is the Director, Assistant Director, Victim/Witness Advocates, and Domestic Violence Coordinator – each of these positions work in different courts and with different populations; however, they each contribute to the same purpose of helping the people who use their services through the justice system. Working with this team has shown me the connections between the VWP, police/investigators, and attorneys with the common goal of better serving the Rockingham and Harrisonburg community.

Some of the services the VWP provides include victim input such as preparing a victim impact statement or presence in a courtroom; notification of case status information, prisoner release information, case developments, and reminders of when to appear in court; protection during court proceedings and further harm from an offender; and financial assistance through restitution or the Virginia Victim Fund. The VWP is also able to provide community resources that they partner with. They work closely with housing services and shelters, counseling options, legal assistance, and JMU resources. These examples are a few of the things I was able to observe firsthand or interact with as an intern at this site. Some of the intern responsibilities and experiences included attending court, filing case summaries, sending notification letters, meeting with victims, and filing or scanning documents.

When I first began my experience at the VWP I was mainly observing my supervisor Magina when working with victims. I learned a lot of the behind the scene work which benefited me when I slowly was given more responsibilities and tasks as an intern. Some of my first tasks included writing case summaries, scanning electronic copies of case files, and inputting information into the Case Management Information System. Eventually I was able to call or speak with victims directly, contact them through phone or mail about their upcoming court



dates, and meet with victims one-on-one during their court hearings. Magina was very good about using the scaffolding teaching method during my time at this site. This enabled me to incrementally improve the work I was doing until I could do it with little assistance. Being able to do the administrative tasks first allowed me to interact more intentionally with victims later. I was able to obtain and understand more information about cases and how to better communicate the process that victims or witnesses were going to go through because of this instructional scaffolding.

It has been a joy and a privilege to work at this site! Some of the advantages include working directly with the advocates on this team. In this environment I felt comfortable asking questions when I didn't understand something. I also felt that I was able to be genuine and have fun while remaining professional. My supervisor Magina was very encouraging and wants the best for the interns she works with. She is able to give us the extra push we need to step out of our comfort zones. Another advantage of being at this site is they work very well with your schedule. During my semester at this internship I was also a full-time student, working a part time job, and an Exec member of an on-campus organization. Before even starting my internship, they worked around my busy schedule. One thing to keep in mind when planning your schedule for your time at the VWP is to keep Monday's and Thursday's open if possible. During these days I was able to attend court which was probably one of my favorite parts about this site. You learn so much about the justice system when observing it for yourself.

Some of the disadvantages include the emotional aspect of working with people who are victims of crime. Some may be physically or psychologically hurt and coming to the VWP fresh out of those situations. Other times while in court victims may see their offender or evidence that may be difficult to sit through and you must be there for them. A frustrating part of the criminal justice process is when an offender may not get what the victim feels they deserve. There have been times where I have left court with a victim who was visibly upset with the way the hearing went. The most difficult challenge for me was seeing that anyone can be a victim. We work with all races, genders, levels of education, and different SES. There is no "type" when it comes to these situations and I think working at this site has influenced what I want to do in the future.

Although I find the legal aspect of victim advocacy very interesting, I don't see myself pursuing a long-term career in this field. I am currently planning on earning a Master's degree in Social Work and hope to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). I have always known I want to serve others as a career, working at the VWP has just solidified my passion for service. Through this internship I have developed administrative skills, learned more about the legal system, and have gained confidence in working one on one with people in tough situations. I would highly recommend this site because of the impact you can make on the Harrisonburg community, and the impact that members on the community can have on you. Field placement is an awesome opportunity to gain real world experience while being an undergrad student. This has been a very humbling and eye-opening experience, and I'm looking forward to applying all that I've learned to my future career.

*Fall 2018 – Samantha Baccaro*



The purpose of the Victim Witness Program is to reduce the trauma of victimization and increase the witness cooperation in prosecuting cases and the mission statement notes it is “designed provide federal crime victims and witnesses with information, services and support during federal prosecution. Our office is committed to ensuring that victims and witnesses of crime are treated fairly throughout their contact with the federal criminal justice system.” The program is comprised of the director, assistant director, domestic violence coordinator, and victim/witness advocate. These four roles work closely with the prosecutors, as well as other services for victims of domestic violence, such as First Step. As stated in their mission, the program strives to provide their clients with all the resources they need for surviving a crime, such as financial assistance, housing, and retribution. The program also divides its time between the General District Court (GDC) and the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court (JDR). GDC primarily works with victims or witnesses who are not related to the offender. Whereas, JDR focuses on those who have been a victim or witness of a crime from a family or household member. I was fortunate enough to be able to learn approaches of being a victim/witness advocate from those these perspectives.

At this site, I was able to interact with victims one-on-one and support them in filing for protective orders or during their court hearings. I would often intake case files and contact victims to notify them of court dates and the program’s role in their case. After receiving a protective order, I would input the case summary into the Case Management Information System. On a case by case basis, we would meet with clients in the office to discuss their options and obtain information on the incident for the prosecution’s case. Since the victim’s safety is our main goal, it was important to keep the client’s information confidential and have an open line of communication between all of those involved. I was also able to gain knowledge of the court system through observation and organizing the weekly docket. I observed many different aspects of the judicial process from first appearance hearings to trials and how important victim cooperation is to an outcome of a case. This was one of my biggest takeaways from field placemen: learning the different ways victims are involved in the system.

One of the many advantages at my site was working with passionate advocates and learning from their empathy and patience when they worked with victims. It was also helpful to have two supervisors, both with a great amount of experience, who encouraged me along the way to be able to complete novel tasks and trusted me with their daily objectives. If I had to choose a disadvantage, I would say the only downfall to this line of work is the extreme amount of patience one must have when working with difficult clients. I saw firsthand how handling a case with an uncooperative client becomes very challenging and my supervisors demonstrated each time with perfect professionalism and self-composure how to handle those situations. There were few limitations to my education because I was allowed a great deal of freedom at my site after the first few weeks and was able to grow a lot from there. The only restriction was that my time there was limited to two days a week and ended after a quick semester. I truly wish I got to see many of the cases through and was able to witness their outcomes.

I certainly learned a variety of skills from this experience, many of which are applicable to my future and career goals. The court system is way more intricate than I originally imagined



and interning at the Commonwealth Attorney's Office has taught me in-depth about the judicial process and courtroom organization and procedures. I realized there are many different components and players to a courtroom and cases have to be heard in a certain fashion. Ultimately, I chose the Victim Witness Program because I thought it was the perfect intersection between psychology and law. A skill useful to both of these sectors is interpersonal communication and this is something I built upon a lot at the program. I was able to be more relatable and use different forms of communication depending on whom I was speaking with. To add, I grasped much of the legal jargon often used in the courtroom and this will be directly influential to my goal to become an attorney.

After having such a positive experience, I wanted to contribute something meaningful to their program. The Victim Witness Program and First Step spearheaded a project in collaboration with the county prosecutor of juvenile and domestic relations and Harrisonburg Police Department's domestic violence unit. The idea was to create a comprehensive report for the responding officers to intake details of the incident at the scene of the crime. Adopted from the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA), this report will aid each agency in providing services for victims based on historical information of both the victim and offender and their relationship. It is designed to be simple and quick for officers to effectively intake during a difficult, traumatic situation for those involved. Police departments, prosecutors, legal advocates, and emergency shelters are primarily charged with providing services and protection to the victim from their abuser and a risk assessment is necessary to provide safety for these victims.

Overall, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to intern for the Victim Witness Program this semester. In addition to gaining practical experience in the field I hope to go into after college, I also learned a great deal of professionalism, organization, and case management. I also learned greater empathy, humility, and perseverance that are bound to be useful for any path I take. I will forever remember this experience that outlined a profession I look forward to becoming a part of and those that helped me gain as much knowledge as possible and made this internship worthwhile.

### ***Fall 2017 – Christina Shulman***

The Victim/Witness Program (VWP) is a non-profit organization that operates within the Commonwealth Attorney's Office in downtown Harrisonburg. The program's main mission "to reduce any trauma or confusion by explaining the criminal justice process and providing the services entitled to a victim or witness of a crime." Their team is made up of a Director, an Assistant Director, a Domestic Violence Coordinator, and a Victim/Witness Advocate. They all work closely with the attorneys and private investigators that work within the Commonwealth's office. The program provides important services to victims and witnesses of crimes who are working their way through the justice system. A majority of the cases that come through the door are victims who are trying to obtain a protective order. The VWP helps victims fill out the necessary paperwork to obtain an order, and also accompanies and preps clients for court. Additionally, the VWP networks with other local Harrisonburg agencies in order to provide



victims with the proper resources that they may need to help them through the process. Resources may include, but are not limited to, financial aid, housing, and counseling.

I am so thankful for my time at the VWP. Both my supervisors and all of the staff were so good to me, and I felt so welcomed from day one. At first, I was very nervous because I felt very unqualified for the job, but there were so many opportunities to gain hands-on experience. Knowledge of the field and how it operates really comes from just running through the system every day and practicing, and I was glad that my supervisors trusted me enough to let me in on their work and projects. After a lot of observations and questions, Magina and Krystle allowed me to really take the lead on a lot of things. I crafted and sent out case notice letters, and was allowed to run through the entire new case process from start to finish. I created new victim files, and actually called and spoke to victims to confirm details about their case and to let them know about the process. I was eventually allowed to prep the victims for court, and on a few occasions, was able to approach the bench to be there for our clients as they spoke to the judge. I was always very nervous and unsure of myself and my abilities, but Magina and Krystle were always so supportive and really believed in me. I also enjoyed the opportunity to attend networking events with local resource agencies. It is truly a wonderful feeling to learn that our little town has powerful forces to provide the best aid they can to those most in need. I used this newfound knowledge to educate others about our resources through my contribution project. Additionally, I had the opportunity to attend Juvenile and Domestic Relations court on Thursdays, and follow along with the docket. I have learned so much about how our justice system runs and how all of the different players of the court work together and interact. I feel like I have a much better grasp on what our system looks like, and furthermore, how much help it needs as well.

There were definitely more advantages than disadvantages at this field placement site, in my opinion. I was really lucky having supervisors as supportive and encouraging as Magina and Krystle. I have nothing but respect for the work they do, and their willingness to share what they have learned with others. They were so accommodating with my schedule, and they taught me so much about our system and how to navigate providing services to our clients. They were so good at teaching me through scaffolding, and allowed me to ask as many clarification questions as I needed to eventually feel comfortable enough to run through the process on my own. Another advantage would be that no one day is the same! This field placement site is perfect for someone who wants a new experience each day, with new stories and clients coming through the door. The only disadvantage that comes with that is sometimes the day's caseload depends on if there are actually clients seeking help or files that come through our door. So while there might not always be a client to work with, there is always a project to work on that really helps out the office as a whole. Mondays and Thursdays are also really important days to be available for court, and I wish I had known that earlier because I would not have scheduled classes that day. That being said, I did craft an "Interested Interns" brochure, so future students will know that those days are important! The only other disadvantage is that the nature of the work can be extremely draining. While each day you hear so many new stories about client's experiences, the stories are of people going through some of the worst experiences of their lives. While it is important to be empathetic and compassionate for your victims, it is also important that you remember that you are there to help them without getting too emotionally invested. I found myself pretty burnt out early on in



my experience, and it was because I was not allowing myself to really decompress after each day. It was only when I learned to employ certain self-care techniques that I began to feel better about my work. That all being said, when a victim sincerely thanks you after you helped them receive a protective order that will keep them and their children safe from their abuser, it makes the bad days not seem so bad.

My experiences at VWP have solidified in me that social work is indeed my true path. While I do not see myself continuing my work within a legal context, I am excited to pursue a Master's degree in Social Work, so that I may continue to provide important services to those in need. Through my work with the VWP, I have learned that even a small action could have a great impact on a client's life, and I want to continue giving back to patients with severe mental illness by working within a treatment team. I have learned that helping someone through the rough times in their lives, whether it is through the criminal justice system or through mental illness, involves a lot of moving parts. My work with the VWP has trained me to be able to navigate such a course with ease and confidence.

All in all, I am extremely thankful for my experiences at the VWP. It has set me on a career path, and has taught me so much about the prevalence of domestic violence and about our court systems. I am glad to have been a part of helping victims through those systems, and providing them with the resources they need to escape abuse and to be able to have a better life. I will remember everything I have learned, and all I have been through. I will use that knowledge and those experiences to aim to be the best social worker I can be, and to continue providing services and help to those in need.

### ***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 take. 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.