



FairField Center

Advancing Dialogue and Understanding



Placement Description

The Community Mediation Center DBA FairField Center was established in 1982 as a nonprofit service organization whose mission is to train and certify mediators and to provide mediation, conflict resolution and transformation, restorative justice services and trainings to individuals, families, businesses, organizations and the community.

Our interns serve as Client Service Coordinators and Assistants in our mediation services, restorative justice, civic engagement and training areas. The Center provides services to over 800 cases and over 1990 individuals, families, businesses, or groups each year.

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

Responsibilities include: client interviews to obtain client concerns and conduct screenings and assessments for issues involving domestic violence, drug and alcohol concerns and abuse. Responsible for accurate notes and to make assessments and recommendations based on these interviews. Conducted comprehensive case and detail management in creating electronic and paper files, scheduling of clients and mediators, agreement writing, formatting and mailing. Coordinate and prepare reports for our seven Family and General District Courts.

Opportunity to practice engagement skills and build listening and communications skills to include the ability to use empathy, rapport building, active listening, paraphrasing and other interpersonal skills to gather required information. Prepare for interviews and screening and uses and reflect on professional communication skills. Organizes and interpret client data, and make good use of professional judgment to develop appropriate mediation strategies and demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and limitations of those involved and their environment.

Participate in Mediation training and observe mediations and after completion of training have the opportunity to co-mediate. Assist the Restorative Justice Branch in their programs like the Listen and Learn juvenile program and attend community action meetings.

Assist the Center in fundraising opportunity, in preparation for community events like the International Festival, attend and engage in staff meeting and represent the Fairfield Center at community meetings / organizations regarding Fairfield services.

Contact Information

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Read about students' experiences at this site below:

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Spring 2017 – Sarah Kline

Fairfield Center strives to help people communicate and interact in a more efficient way. They offer several services towards this goal including mediation, restorative justice, and training for people wanting to be a mediator and continuing education classes for certified mediators. They also provide services to the business community on how to communicate within the organization or workshop. These services include but are not limited to how to conduct a productive meeting, sensitivity training, and how to deal with conflict in the workplace. They are also very active in the community and are often involved in community activities such as the international festival.

I worked in mediation services and we as interns were offered many experiences that are unique to this site. I attended several mediator trainings that were focused on training people to become certified mediators. I attended basic mediator training, family mediation training, domestic abuse and mediation, and finally a training on Virginia law all for no cost to me. They offer all their interns these trainings free of charge which normally can be hundreds of dollars. We were allowed to participate in the same way that any of the other people were and at the end we received official completion papers. At the end of the semester, I had all the required trainings that are needed to begin the process of being certified. The next step in the certification process is to observe a certified mediator and we were also allowed to do this. We were allowed to sit in on real mediations and observe the mediation. I was allowed to sit in on three mediations that were from the juvenile court. They were all based around the issues of custody, visitation, and child support. The final unique experience that we were allowed to participate in was we went to general district court and observed the cases as they were presented in court. We would go with a certified mediator to see if the judge would refer any cases to mediation, and if they did I would take all of their information and have them write down anything that was relevant for the case. I would also have to determine if they could mediate at that time and if so I would walk them back to the mediation center and if not I would determine a time when they could mediate and schedule that. We never had a case referred to us while I sat in court, but it was very interesting to watch the court proceeding and identify what might be referred to us from the docket.

The everyday activities that I performed really depended on the day and what times I was at the site. The main tasks all involved case management. Every day in the morning we would make reminder calls and prepare the folders for the following day's mediations. As we received new cases, we would build them in the database and do intakes with each individual. After clients had mediated, if they had come to an agreement we would proofread and format the agreements, send them to the clients, and make calls in reference to them once they had received them. We would also input the client evaluations and the information provided by the clients into the database. When they signed and returned the agreements we would do the court report, bill the case, and close the case. Also on Wednesdays, we had a staff meeting where we discussed what each part of the center was doing and any updates.

I really enjoyed working there because the day was always different. We were always doing different things with different people. Each case was different and had its own issues. I did not want to do the same thing every day and at this site you might do the same activities, but it's always different because the cases are all different. There were also several interns that were there when I was there, so I was rarely alone to answer phones or to do the work. It also helped because you had someone to help you if you didn't know how to do something or if you needed help with a case. I also really liked that I learned a lot about case management because I feel that in the Psychology major that is something that we do not really learn about, and I think it is really useful to have experience with it because it is a critical part of a lot of jobs that are in this field.



There is a lot to learn at this site and it is a continued learning process. After being there for the 150 hours, there are still things I do not know how to do or need to ask about. It was really hard to first because I started right after they had just had the winter holiday, so the court was backed up and the center had been without interns for a month. Everything was backed up and entering into that was stressful because we were shown how to do a lot of things once and then told to try to do it on our own. It was really a crash course on how to do a lot of things because of how many cases we had to work on. We would do what we could do then ask each other and try to work it out. I actually think that helped us learn, and we still continued to do it until the end when there was something we were not sure about. At the beginning, I never believed that I would learn how to do all of the things that were required for a case, but by the end I had.

I learned several skills that will be useful when I become a counselor. I learned case management skills that I think will be really important when I need to manage my case load and be able to do all the case notes and calls to the clients. It is not always the case that counselors have someone to do their billing and other things involved in the administrative side, so it is good to have some exposure to it before graduate school. I also learned a lot about listening, finding the important information, clarifying that information, and how to respond in a direct concise manner.

Something to consider about this placement is that it can be hectic and often there are several people talking on the phones or several phones ringing at one time. Interruptions happen often and you have to be able to multitask, often doing three or four things at once. I would be in the middle of a task then have to drop that task to answer the phone and deal with whatever that call was about. I also had to talk to a person, be looking up their information and case notes, as well as any agreements we had on them while taking notes about what they were say. Prioritizing is key at this placement, but it also offers a chance to enhance these skills.

Fall 2016 – Kat Donovan

The mission of the FairField Center is to “help people listen, plan, and interact effectively.” They are a non-profit center that offers conflict resolution, restorative justice, civic engagement, communication training, and business services. As an intern, I worked in mediation services. The vast majority of cases are court-referred and subsidized through the Juvenile and Domestic Relations and General District Courts in Harrisonburg/Rockingham County, the Augusta County/Staunton Courthouse, and Waynesboro; however, many clients come to mediation of their own volition and pay out of pocket based on a sliding scale fee structure.

My day-to-day experiences consisted mainly of case management including (but not limited to) building cases in our database with information from court petitions and motions, intake interviews with clients over the phone, preparing case files for mediators before mediation sessions, post mediation processes (billing, court bookkeeping, entering demographic data into an Excel worksheet, and processing client evaluations), editing and mailing mediation agreements, plus closing and filing cases. I also attended weekly staff meetings, sat in on a mediation, and attended General District Court and Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court sessions. Occasionally, I checked our mailbox at the courthouse for referrals from judges, and I also dropped off billing forms at the courthouse.



I spent most of my time on the phone with clients talking about their cases. The vast majority of cases I handled involved custody, visitation, and/or support (mainly child support but occasionally spousal support). The purpose of these intake interviews is to get the pertinent background details of the case before mediation in order to maximize the time spent in session, as well as to screen for the appropriateness of cases for mediation. Sometimes families are referred to mediation even though there are active Child Protective Services investigations or domestic abuse, in which case it is not appropriate for the FairField Center to conduct mediation. These intake interviews are simultaneously fascinating and draining. While it is always interesting to hear the circumstances of cases, going over the minute details of current custody and visitation arrangements plus the particulars of gross monthly income, health insurance, childcare bills, etc., is exhausting. It can also be emotionally taxing to hear the specifics of the wide range of problems people face, including single parenthood, irresponsible and potentially dangerous parenting, and instances of abuse/violence.

This site is very supportive and open to making your experience what you want it to be. The staff and other interns or volunteers are always open to suggestions and invite interns to do things such as sit in on mediations. Everyone is incredibly friendly and happy to answer questions and help in anyway. They are willing to put interns to work right away in the sense that there is immediate on-the-job training. This could be a positive or a negative for some people—it may be uncomfortable to make a phone call to a client on the very first day, but the staff and volunteers are there with you every step of the way. Learning by doing is the philosophy for learning how to complete tasks. This may be intimidating to many, but it is the best and only way to pick up skills in this work atmosphere. There is too much information to go over in one sitting, so interns are assigned tasks with some instruction the first time (or two) around and are then expected to accomplish that task again without instruction. These tasks may be made confusing by the large number of steps it takes to complete a task and the sometimes overwhelming filing and organization system. However, if you are unsure of something, it is encouraged that you ask questions.

At this site, I learned mostly about the mediation process but I learned a lot about other forms of alternative dispute resolution (such as restorative justice). This was a great site to learn about the basic forms of dispute resolution at a micro-level. I was able to build a foundational knowledge of conflict for graduate school, where I plan to study conflict resolution at the macro-level (international conflict).

I also learned a lot about the legal system (as it pertains to juveniles plus General District Court) in Virginia and various court processes. This site would be a good fit for those looking to learn about families involved in the legal system, including matters of protective orders and *guardian ad litums* (lawyers appointed to represent the best interests of the child and investigate such matters). As it was related to child support cases, I learned a lot about healthcare programs for children in Virginia such as Family Access to Medical Insurance Security (FAMIS), plus federal welfare programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In this way, a field placement at the FairField Center could interest individuals who would like to work with needy families as part of their career. I also encountered cases that involved incarcerated parents, the Department of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE), and the Department of Social Services. These cases could be trickier to manage compared to other cases because the typically involved more issues for interns to inquire about over the phone.

Other than in these capacities, people interested in psychology will also develop interpersonal communication skills just because of the sheer amount of client interaction that is necessary. This includes opportunity for professional communication with peers, mediators, and court officials. You may also have



the opportunity to look at developmental psychology from a different perspective because custody and visitation agreements always reflect the age and developmental level of the child(ren) in question. Mediation in general would be a good field for someone with a psychology background to enter into, as the education a psychology student receives could give good insight to guiding conversations and helping people come to a compromise. However, it is important to note that while mediators are certified, it is not does not allow for them to give legal advice, nor is it the role of a mediator to offer counseling or clinical services to clients.

Spring 2015 – Daniel Delcoco

FairField Center's mission is to promote understanding through dialogue. This mission is comprised of five sub-categories: conflict resolution, restorative justice, business services, civic engagement, and training. Conflict resolution is the category/goal you will be working with if you intern at FairField. This is resolving any kind of dispute through mediation, be it a property, workplace, or divorce dispute. Clients are either referred to the center through the courts when they go to the court to file a petition, or clients come to FairField on their own accord. Clients who are referred through the courts do not pay for mediation; the court covers this expense. Clients who come on their own, though, have to each pay hourly depending on their gross yearly income according to a sliding fee scale. Day-to-day activities at the FairField Center for me included building new cases, conducting intakes with clients, giving clients and mediators reminder calls for those with next-day appointments, preparing their folders for mediation, creating and sending documents to mediators, mailing draft agreement forms (the agreements drawn up by clients in their mediation sessions) to clients, and faxing signed agreements with court reports to court. I would not do all of this every single day. Mostly, I found myself preparing documents for clients with next-day appointments, reminding clients and mediators, and doing intake calls. Intake calls can easily take up the bulk of a work day at FairField, as each one can last anywhere from 5-15 minutes (going over 15 minutes is not advisable) and there are always many intake calls to be done. In all honesty, I really loved working at FairField and was sad when I had to say goodbye; I had been apprehensive at the start, though. When I first started my field placement at FairField, I was nervous that I would crack while working under pressure and not be able to get the job done. Something that could induce this would be having to deal with multiple clients at once, or having to hear other people talking on the phone while you are trying to talk to a client on the phone. One of the things I did not like about working at FairField was just how suddenly busy everything could get at one moment and how everything would calm down and then randomly get very busy again; it was extremely variable. Although, I've learned that this is to be expected at any professional job. If you get distracted easily by other people talking while you are trying to communicate via telephone with someone, this may not be the site for you. That being said, though, I learned how to effectively deal with this by just plugging my free ear with one hand, and listening to the client with my other ear. The work environment at FairField, though, is a rare one that I believe to be the best environment anyone could ask for. Everyone is



extremely open, caring, and genuine. The relationships you will form at this site (if you choose to let them form) will last a lifetime. I definitely plan to keep in touch with and visit Aaron, my supervisor. Working at FairField has helped increase my competence in many areas. I am better able to navigate VistaShare, the online client/case database that is used by the FairField Center. I am also better at doing this rather quickly, when I am on the phone with a client. Being trained as a Client Service Coordinator by Aaron helped increase my competence, as I was able to take in and learn a lot of pertinent information. Additionally, I have gotten a lot better at being independent at work. By this I just mean that I am able to work productively and effectively when Aaron is gone and is not there to answer any questions that I might have or that might arise. Because I am, for the most part, doing the same tasks every time I go to work at my site, it helps a lot to have a set schedule of things that I aim to complete by the end of my work day. Engaging in these same tasks every other day has allowed me to gain more knowledge surrounding the conflict resolution process as a whole, which has increased my competence as it enables me to do my job more effectively. Ironically, working at FairField confirmed for me that I do not enjoy the mediation process as much as I do the therapeutic process. Mediation is more about helping clients find common ground, and there are many legal issues surrounding the mediation process. Therapy, on the other hand, is more about delving into clients' emotions and why they are present. This interests me much more than mediation, which is fortunate because I am going to graduate school for marriage and family therapy.

Kaitlynn Iantosca

The Fairfield Center is a non-profit organization in downtown Harrisonburg that provides many different services. They do mediations, restorative justice, trainings and offer many other services. The Fairfield Center is also very involved in the Harrisonburg community. As an intern, however, I only worked in the mediation center part of the organization. I spent most of my time doing case management work. Most of the mediation cases that the Fairfield Center handles are court referred child custody, visitation and support cases. There is also a percentage of the cases that are client pay or General District Court cases. These might include cases in which someone has not paid for a service provided for them and the party providing the service files against them in civil court. We receive referrals from Harrisonburg/Rockingham County, Staunton/Augusta County and Waynesboro.

I conducted many intake interviews over the phone to gather relevant information from the clients before they came in to mediation which could help the mediator be more prepared. This experience was very valuable for me because I plan to go into counseling. Any kind of communication skills are important for pretty much any field, but intakes are also very important for counseling and I am very grateful to have gotten the opportunity for practice here. There is also a lot of administrative work when it comes to case management. I had to keep the data for all cases up-to-date in the computer system and make sure all the tasks were completed before and after the mediation session.

I also had the opportunity to sit in on court many times. In General District Court, we screened the cases to see if they were appropriate for mediation. I was also very fortunate to sit in on Juvenile and Domestic Relations court to watch our family cases come full circle. Unlike General District Court, these



proceedings are closed to the public except for representatives from the Fairfield Center. I learned so much more about the process from seeing these cases in court because I could see how the judge reacted to the clients and what the standard practice is. It also helped when clients had questions about the process.

When appropriate, the Center allows interns to observe actual mediation sessions. It is very beneficial to see mediators in action and how different mediators handle different situations. This also helps when clients have questions about what to expect. The Fairfield Center also offers many opportunities for training. They offer interns the chance to participate in these trainings for free or just the cost of the materials. Some of these opportunities include the basic mediation training, family mediation training and others on effective communicating. These are all great opportunities for professional or personal development and the Center really encourages interns to participate. The staff at the Center is small, but that made me feel more comfortable in that there is more of a sense of working together than if there were more people doing their own tasks. In this kind of organization where the community is the main focus, this is a huge advantage to their efficacy.

My experience at the Fairfield Center will no doubt be invaluable to me as a future counselor. I was able to improve my communication skills and learn how to listen for certain things while conducting intakes. I learned how to ask better reflective questions and instill a sense of confidence in the process in the clients. I was able to practice confidentiality and good ethical practices with every case. However, I think probably the most valuable lessons I will take away from my placement at the Fairfield Center are from my interactions with the clients. I was exposed to clients that were so incredibly different than anyone I have ever encountered and I have learned so much from them. Every case is different because every person is different. As a counselor, I will be interacting with people that are also different and I am so grateful to have gotten the opportunity to be exposed to this kind of diversity so early.