Hope House: A Reflection

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I spent the last several weeks interning at an organization called Hope House. An affiliate of Catholic Community Services (CCS), this organization serves as a food and clothing bank for individuals and families that struggle to be qualified for help elsewhere. Coming in to this internship, I had the learning objective of understanding the management aspects of Hope House. In particular, understanding the procedures for keeping track of stock. I also had the learning objective of successfully completing a client intake. Referring back to my initial objectives, can I say that I completed my objectives? Yes. In fact, I did more than complete my initial objects. I was given many other opportunities for success throughout my time at the organization. Those other instances will be discussed later, but for now I will describe the processes I went through to achieve my objectives.

To begin, in order to fully comprehend the procedures used for keeping stock, I spent a lot of time working in the kitchen, with a hardworking couple known as the “Shed Pixies”, and in the “scariest place at Hope House”—the upstairs. The kitchen work, in reality, actually entails more than just a kitchen. This work includes bringing donations onto the floor for client access, picking up loose hangers in the clothing sections, putting ruined clothes in a laundry basket, a repair basket, the garbage, or a bag to take to Goodwill later, restocking coffee and snacks for the waiting room, and helping clients with their baby, hygiene, emergency food, or homeless supply needs (clients bring a sheet that lets staff know what they qualify for and the staff fills out how many items they received). It sounds like a lot of work, and it really is. Not only are we picking up where the Shed Pixies left off (you’ll understand what I mean by that in a moment), we are also working directly with the clientele as we become overburdened by or (most likely) run out of supplies. So, if the kitchen staff does so much, where does that fit in everyone else? Enter the Shed Pixies. They are an elderly couple that arrives 2 hours before Hope House opens each day to create emergency food packs, empty the donation bins, stock the kitchen with new supplies, prepare several (usually between eight or ten) boxes of shoes and clothing that the kitchen staff can use to restock clothing racks throughout the day, and notify Cheri (the executive director) when supplies are low and need to be ordered. If it wasn’t for them, logistically, the kitchen staff would be running everywhere to find supplies during a busy day and providing poor support for clientele. Finally, there is the upstairs storage. Unfortunately, this area has received a bad reputation by certain, seasoned staff for being disorganized and led by a still-green volunteer by the name of Kathleen. Personally, I found Kathleen to be amazing and had the privilege of working by her side on several occasions. But, on to the upstairs storing logistics. To start, all leftover, off-season clothes and holiday décor/items are stored upstairs in one room. There is also a room dedicated to camping gear and heavy jackets, reserved specifically for the homeless. Linens and towels have their own room, because sorting, matching sets, and folding such big material would clutter what little room is available in the shed and kitchen. One room used to be the executive director’s office, but it has since changed to office supplies and gifts for birthdays or anniversaries. Finally, there is a room dedicated solely to infant and child clothing and supplies (because we always have too many baby clothes to fit downstairs). As I stated earlier, some staff have given the upstairs storage a bad reputation. However, if it wasn’t for that storage space, so many supplies would be lost to the garbage and Goodwill because of lack of space or seasonal needs. Also, if it wasn’t for Kathleen’s presence (and her sewing machine!), Hope House would never have had a set way of repairing damaged items.

Once I understood the logistics of managing Hope House’s stock, I was ready to begin crafting the perfect intake of a client. To properly train me, I was given five different tasks throughout my internship: greet clients, input or update client information, interview clients, fill out forms for clients, and, finally, help the client check out through an outtake process. All of these five tasks were completed in two locations—the front desk and the intake office room. Naturally, one might assume that greeting clients occurred at the front desk. That is a correct assumption. The outtake process also occurs there. This process involves making sure each person only takes enough clothes to create three outfits and only takes seven household items, then bagging the items and writing down (on the clients sheet) how many items were taken in the end. At the front desk, you are also in charge of monitoring the coffee and snack intake, answering most questions (the rest are deferred to the executive director), bringing donations to the kitchen, and unlocking/locking the door to Hope House at the beginning and end of the day. Inside the intake office room, you are, just as the room describes itself, in charge of intakes. This involves asking the client for their I.D. (as Hope House is located on and across the street from two separate school grounds, we cannot have our clients who are sex offenders do their own shopping), checking if they exist in our computer system and inputting their data if that is not the case, checking what items they are in need of, but also what they qualify for (residents of Bellingham go to the Food Bank for food and clients cannot receive certain items more than once a week, month, or year), and filling out sheet that tells the other staff what they can and cannot receive that time around. There is more to the work done in this office, but I was unable to learn those things due to liabilities (and time required to learn them).

Along with achieving my learning objects, I also had some unique experiences that brought about unexpected lessons. Now, most people, when told that their first day on a job would include a woman with mental illnesses taking her underwear off and walking around, half-naked, would probably become so uncomfortable they don’t necessarily want to return. As that was my first day, I was actually more eager to return. That is because I am focusing my Human Services major on Disability Studies. Working with clients in the heat of their mental illness is my ultimate goal. When the woman stripped her clothes off, I had the opportunity of engaging her and witnessing how the rest of the staff handled the situation. Some of the staff hightailed it out of the building, but one gentleman stepped up and spoke to her very calmly. When she started yelling about everything from people looking at her to not wanting people to know she needed shaving cream, he ignored her outbursts and kept encouraging her to put her clothes on, asked/grabbed what emergency supplies she needed, and got her out of the building as smoothly as possible. Suffice to say, I took many notes from him that I plan to use later in my career. Another event that occurred during this time was a break-in. Except, we were still there when the break-in occurred. This experience taught me two things. First, though it’s good that I am comfortable around diverse populations, I will need to make sure I am in a safe environment. I now have a key to Hope House and have gone in after hours on several occasions by myself. For future reference, I need to make sure I have a safety plan. The second lesson I learned was to take initiative and suggest things when I see opportunities for improvement. I suggested a peephole in the doors and within two days, they were installed. The final experience I want to touch on is that of the employee gossip circle. Let me start with this: Oh my goodness! The majority of the volunteers are senior citizens and many of the women of that age range are very particular. They do not like change and, regardless of the executive director’s stance of how to manage different areas of the organizations, still do everything their way. At first, I went along with them. After all, some of them were helping to train me. However, once I understood the layout of Hope House and got proper direction from the executive director on what and how we distribute supplies, I was ready to stand my ground—against one of the woman in particular. This woman would go through clothing that was already hung up for clients and throw them into the garbage or a Goodwill bin on the basis that those clothes were things she would never wear, complain about stuff being upstairs because “it’s out of season and there’s no point in keeping it”, and would give improper amounts of baby items (the client is only allowed one diaper per child and two extra items on the side for all the children) to clients. This woman was, overall, my most unexpected adventure and the biggest learning experience for me. I think, through my interactions with her, I developed my presence as an intern at Hope House. I like to think that an intern is someone who takes time to learn from the organization they are at, but more importantly, they embody what the organization is, does, and represents to the fullest. Looking at it humorously, I was a walking billboard of Hope House’s mission statement and policies.

To conclude, Hope House has changed me in so many ways that I can’t even begin to describe. I’ve learned that I have strength in organizing and restructuring layouts of rooms so that multiple individuals can utilize them. In regard to work experience, I’ve learned that I can hold conversations while on the computer, typing information. I am so grateful to the many volunteers and to Cheri, the executive supervisor, for being with me every step of the way. They made this experience worthwhile. The clients make me grateful for the same reason. This community is so welcoming and wants to help everyone (and each other). I want to continue on in my internships, and later on in my career, with that same mentality—treating others like family.