In the Fall Quarter of 2013, I very was overwhelmed by a hectic work schedule. I worked as a BISS (Behavioral Intervention Support Specialist) for Service Alternatives, Inc. So, when I needed to find an internship site, I decided that the best—most practical—place to do so would be at my job. This is because I had lucked out with my occupation—Service Alternatives, Inc. is a Human Services organization!

After figuring out my placement, the next step was a bit more challenging. How could I fit an internship into an already busy work schedule? To be honest, I really had to stretch to make it work. But, in the end I succeeded. See, in the first 3 months of my hire, the program I was at, Riverside, a group home for boys with low-functioning, non-verbal autism, had gone through three program managers. Because of that, the program lost some of its organization and a lot of its structure, thus needing a lot of help to pick itself back off the ground. That said, I made the decision to, as my internship, help in the repairs of a (somewhat) broken program.

Now, there were two areas I chose to focus my attention on. The first, was a communication tool for the staff to use with the non-verbal boys—in other words, a sign language cheat sheet. I chose this learning objective because I felt that any program with non-verbal clients who know sign language should be using said sign language, and it was ridiculous to me that no such tool existed at the home. The second, was to help with paperwork upkeep (basic printing out of new forms, updating binders, ordering new supplies; etc.). I chose this learning objective because paperwork (Incident Reports, CPS Reports, Med Reorders/Tracking/Change Forms, School Logs, Cleaning Schedules, Timesheets; etc.) was coming through quickly and no one (other than the supervisors, who were required to) was stepping up to handle the influx, thereby causing more chaos in an already stressful environment. Basically, all I did was print out, fax, and change out forms in the binders. Very simple, but *very* necessary!

Now, on to a deeper topic, there were a lot of things I experienced and/or saw while at this organization—specifically, things that we discussed in depth during seminars. Those “things” were ethical issues, organization issues, professional development, and direct service issues.

To begin, ethical issues, as I have come to understand them, are circumstances in which harm is brought to an individual. The type of harm could be physical, mental, or emotional. For example, if a person, who was supposed to maintain a 1:1 presence with a client for their entire shift, but they walk away and leave said client alone for 15+ minutes, thereby giving the client an opening to run away—barefoot and poorly clothed—that is an ethical issue. The client runs the risk of physical harm based on attire and lack of supervision and mental and emotional harm based on the fact that they were “abandoned” by someone who was supposed to keep them safe. I use this example, because I witnessed it. And I witnessed several more occurrences throughout my time with the company. It is not to say that the organization is the cause of the issues, but the staff that they hire do not seem to understand the importance of not falling into the trap of such ethical issues.

However, even though I wouldn’t call the organization out as being the entity at fault, I would say I ran into a lot of organization*al* issues. When I came to Riverside, it was a mess. Four months later, there is still piles of paperwork scattering the floor of the staff room, legal documents not being filled out (in a professional manner or at all), replaced when missing, and thrown into locations where they do not belong (and are lost when we need them most). As much as I tried to help repair such issues with my learning objectives, I was constantly turned away by senior coworkers who wanted to do the work themselves.

Which brings me to the next issue I witnessed—professional development. Coming in to Service Alternatives, Inc. with an extensive knowledge of human services and disability studies, I was well aware of why the organization required certain standards and paperwork for their group homes. However, my coworkers never seemed to understand that. Most of them, openly hate working for a struggling non-profit organization (i.e., constant rants and complaints about lack of funding/pay and openly refusing to do legal paperwork correctly because they “do not care.”). When faced with that, and senior coworkers who were protective of their comfort zones (but later quit, so we saw that the work they wouldn’t share wasn’t even being done properly by them!), it was obvious that professional development at this organization completely lacked and/or the environment became so stressful that such development would regress.

Finally, my organization related to direct service issues is many ways because it is a direct service. There were and are a lot of issues surrounding the legal guardians of the clients, including anything from lack of information (say we got a new client and we were not told what their triggers were until four months after they arrived and had sent two employess to the hospital) and constant complaints (not being satisfied with the client’s appearance, development while at the program, lack of getting what they want out of the staff; etc.). Also, because it is 100% direct service, the organization constantly finds itself burning out employee left and right and has a hard time hiring new employees to replace the ones leaving.

The final issue I encountered was overall quality of supervision. I have to be honest. It completely lacked. With the stress the organization is under, and the fact that my supervisor was pregnant and constantly away for trainings as well as having very negative coworkers—I felt like I had to run my own internship most of the time.

However, that isn’t to say it wasn’t a *good* internship. I am glad I chose it, regardless of the outcome. My primary goal was to learn sign language and I was very successful. I can use it, now, with multiple clients and that in turn, helps encourage them to practice verbal communication, which is one of *their* primary goals. I also know enough about the paperwork that tends to be forgotten, that I was able to train new staff on how to document and file such paperwork away (hopefully to combat the negative cycle). If I interned here again, it would be to fix the employee morale. Because that was the biggest issue I ran into, and if I was able to heal it, employees and clients who come to this program would (I hope) get the professional development and basic development that they deserve. Because, as much as I harped on this organization, it is a *good* organization. If we can change the mindset of the staff, it could be a *great* one!