I am interning for Valley Cities Counseling, a non-profit mental health agency that serves the greater King County area. There are several sights in Auburn, Federal Way, Kent, Renton, and Midway, and I work at the Renton site. Basically, Valley Cities is like any mental health provider, except it only takes clients who would qualify for or already have Medicaid and a few other insurances under the Washington State Apple Care act. The clients that we serve at Valley Cities have every sort of mental disorder ranging from not as serious change of life issues, to extremely serious, like Schizophrenia. I believe in the importance of this work because the people being served here have no less need than anyone else with mental health disparities, yet their social status causes them to fall through the cracks. Most people who come in are either homeless, on the verge of homelessness, and are living well below the poverty line. So in fact, most of these people are actually dealing with much more than someone with the same problems. As an undergrad intern without any licensure or even a degree, I mostly help with tasks that busy clinicians and care coordinators don’t have time for, and I sit in to learn as much as I can about professional mental health.

My first job as a shadow to the care coordinators is to assist them with organizing resources and becoming knowledgeable about the more complicated processes of connecting to resources, in order to help with clients who come in needing additional help. Part of Valley Cities’ agenda is holistic care more comprehensive than just mental health. Yes, mental health services are the only thing that they provide directly to clients, but we do not ignore other issues such as homelessness, job-seeking, childcare, school issues, domestic violence, etc. I have been researching resources and organizations that Valley Cities has connected to in the past, as well as trying to find other options within King County that would be viable as future connections for clients. Basically as a shadow of Care Coordinators, I am helping in case management with clients. I also can advocate for the client on behalf of VCC as an agency, to help them
receive more care from other agencies that are more specialized in housing or other services. Basically, I am helping in case management for clients.

A specific example of when I’ve done this is when Amanda, the senior care coordinator, asked me to read a packet about Shelter Plus Care, a King County program that gives shelter and clinical care to those who qualify. To qualify, they must be homeless, be associated with a partnering organization (in this case obviously Valley Cities) have an income under 50% of the median of the area, and be disabled in some way – in the case of Valley Cities, it would be a mental/psychological disability. Amanda was unaware of all the steps in the extremely complicated process it was to enroll in SPC and she wanted me to synthesize it into a “Cliffnotes” version for her.

I also got to sit in on a meeting with a client and Amy, one of the care coordinators. I sat in and listened as she described her situation of not having a job, despite some offers. The problem was that she was almost finished on her lease, and she didn’t have a job because she had quit it, thinking she would be moving with her daughter to Tacoma after School was out. This fell through though, and she became jobless, almost homeless, with a daughter with no daycare lined up. She was in dire straits, so Amy, Emily, and I started scrambling together all the resource pamphlets we had on childcare, because that is what she needed the most. She was also looking for somewhere to stay once she was done with her lease. I suggested a nanny job, so she could take her kid with her, while earning decent money and even possibly finding a live-in situation. I also went to my church in Mercer Island, where the client had a possible job opportunity. This being so, I talked to some people about possibly helping with our benevolence fund, to get a deposit or first month rent payment made on behalf of the client, or something along those lines, because she had an opportunity, just no funds for such an expensive area.

I have also been able to sit in on therapy sessions, and learn about different therapy techniques and methods. This has been extremely interesting and relevant to a hopeful career in some sort of psychology field but more specifically therapy. I have come to learn that in a professional work
environment, I extremely dislike all the red tape that has to be cut through, in order to get anything accomplished. I’ve sat in on several meetings already, which have bored me to death, because I would rather be actually researching resources, or listening to a therapist during a session with a client. In addition, I’ve realized that sometimes things can be quite inefficient, because of the lack of people in a non-profit to staff all the jobs that need to get done. So I’ve been pretty busy assisting people, but often times I feel frustrated that I have to be doing things like figuring out how to apply for housing, because there has been no one in the past to figure this out.

It seems strange that an agency like VCC needs to figure out the legal aspects or even just learn how to fill out paperwork, simply because it is so complicated, and everyone else is working on other things and they don’t have time. It is important to know these things though, so that VCC can walk alongside its clients if they need to fill out these applications, and be successful in connecting them with extra care. One thing I really do like about this professional work environment is how much of a difference I actually see it making. I’m not in school - I’m actually seeing what I’ve been learning about being applied, and it works. This is especially true when I get to sit in on therapy sessions. It blows my mind how much good it does when the therapists are able to care for their clients and serve their mental health needs in a way that is intentional and aimed at healing and success. The other thing I like most about interning at VCC is that I have so many opportunities to learn more. I am about to start a web-training to become certified in Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and I have been researching on my downtime, all the types of therapy methods utilized at VCC. I like that when I am not doing specific tasks, all I am asked to do is improve my own knowledge, so that I can be more affective when the time comes for connecting people to resources or when it comes to listening to therapy. I’m not really allowed to say anything in therapy, or really give any opinion, because I am not a professional and don’t have any accreditation, but I am still encouraged by my supervisors to learn as much as I can anyway. Overall, I would say I enjoy this internship, and I’m learning a lot about what it means to serve the under-served in a professional environment, even though it is quite frustrating sometimes because of all the legality and specific red tape involved with giving out governmental assistance.