The Houston Interfaith Worker Justice Center, part of the Interfaith Worker Justice National, is a nonprofit organization that strives for social justice. Through numerous avenues, it provides low wage workers resources to learn and improve their rights in the workplace. For example, they can be connected to attorneys, allies from the community, and other social service organizations. The Center also mobilizes the religious community on issues and campaigns to improve wages, benefits and working conditions for low-wage workers. However, the role of the worker is stressed as most important because they must be proactive and responsible for filing their paperwork, following up on progress, and hopefully becoming a part of the organization to help other workers. During my internship at HIWJ, I participated in a number of different programs, but most of the time I worked on individual cases, taking some of my own and helping staff members. It was a challenge in the beginning to speak well with native speakers, but well worth the effort. It was necessary to gain their trust, and in some cases more importantly than explaining, the workers appreciated that I and other staff members took the time to listen to their stories, which was a concept that HIWJ stresses as one of the most important steps in opening a case.

During my first couple of weeks, I learned about various aspects of the organization, attending protests against implementation of the 287(g) act, a faith labor luncheon, and training for working on wage theft and discrimination cases. The luncheon was an extensive program in which the participants (most of whom were pastors, priests, rabbis, etc. being encouraged to join the organization) learned about worker and immigrant issues. Some workers were given a chance
to tell their stories of discrimination and injury on the job, including two who had teamed up to form their own organization for paralyzed workers. Training for wage theft cases included attending a few weekly workers’ rights meetings, in which the staff would educate the workers about employment laws and talk to them about their cases afterwards. I also attended a workers’ rights assembly, in which workers were invited to voice their opinions and goals about HIWJ. I participated in another special training about popular education, which stresses empowerment and active participation in one’s own education, going against the traditional method of teaching that puts the teacher in a position of authority. Annica Gorham, the director, met with me and the rest of the interns to understand what kind of opportunities we were looking for and present our options, which I appreciated because she showed that she wanted us to learn from our experience, rather than perform menial tasks and observe. Our role as interns was also important because the organization is only about two years old; they are constantly in need of support due to the influx of workers seeking help. Because there were four interns, and only two of us had begun working, we helped the staff with their cases before training. In this way, I learned a bit about the process and got the chance to talk to workers, practicing my Spanish. I was most concerned about talking with native speakers because I had no experience in that regard, but with time I spoke and understood more easily. Fortunately I learned phrases and legal terminology that were easy for the workers and staff to understand so that language barriers usually did not impede progress on the cases. As soon as we had finished training, we were assigned cases. The process seemed simple, because without legal training there are three basic methods to help workers: connecting them with attorneys and governmental agencies such as the Department of Labor and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, contacting the employer and organizing an action or protest if necessary, and educating the workers about their rights.
However, this organization proves its importance because they are a non-biased party through which workers can understand how to solve their problems. Often, workers are afraid of turning to lawyers or governmental agencies on their own, especially if they are undocumented. My first case, which involved an issue of wage theft complicated by a misunderstanding over whether the worker was a contractor or not, remained unresolved due to the lack of participation of the worker, which was a lesson in the work of nonprofits. The employer or the perceived “enemy” was not the only one making the work difficult.

All of the interns, besides working on wage theft and discrimination cases, helped with another aspect of the organization according to their interests. I helped a staff member who specialized in domestic outreach. Domestic outreach is a simple but important program in which one of the staff members talks to local domestic workers in the community to encourage them to join the organization. We would mostly find domestic workers such as nannies and maids at parks caring for their employers’ children, or at bus stops and popular gathering places in the neighborhoods where they worked. I thought it was usually difficult to approach them in a manner that did not discourage them, but Laura, the staff member who I worked with, had developed her routine. She would greet them and make conversation before explaining that HIWJ was a helpful resource to turn to for any sort of problems on the job. Many of these women knew Laura and were responsible for making her job easier when spreading the word about the organization so that new prospective members would not be intimidated. We encountered this stumbling block often, understandably, because those who did not know about HIWJ were hesitant to talk about their situation if they were undocumented. Therefore, developing relationships with workers who can represent the organization and identify with each other is a major part of its success.
Although none of my cases were fully resolved, I made headway on two, which were passed on to the staff when I left. There are so many different aspects of the organization but its success relies on its personal relationship with workers, many of whom now work for the organization and are responsible for its trustworthy, effective reputation. Although working for this organization was an overwhelming learning experience at times, everyone on staff was grateful for our contributions, no matter what our experiences. It was also important for me to see the relationships between the workers and staff, and develop relationships with the workers with whom I worked in order to understand the nature of this nonprofit.