

**INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE – BEMIDJI AREA
2014 ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST OF THE YEAR
CONNIE GIROUX**

INTRODUCTION

Ms. Giroux serves in the Bemidji Area Indian Health Service as a District Environmental Health Specialist (EHS). She came to us from the South Dakota Science & Technology Authority / Sanford Underground Research Facility where she was a Safety and Health Specialist. Now as the District EHS she is a program manager and leader with responsibility for administering environmental health (EH) services to 9 federally recognized Tribes located throughout Minnesota and supervisory responsibility to 2 field EH staff.

SPECIAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Area Level Impacts:

Ms. Giroux was able to ensure quality EH Services to the Minnesota Tribes at a time when the Bemidji Area DEHS was in a transition that left the program 60% staffed and one Tribal program short a Sanitarian. She stepped right into this workload challenge by effectively covering services to 5 additional Tribes while learning key program functions and maximizing her professional development. Under these challenging conditions, Ms. Giroux applied the public health approach by utilizing onsite assessments and WebEHRS to define and prioritize workload; following through to implementation, mitigation and evaluation. She conducted 30 surveys normally covered by the field staff and responded to 7 additional requests for technical assistance. These were in the form of food sanitation surveys, powwow site assessments, temporary food vendor surveys, hospital hazard surveillance surveys, and other facility surveys. One poorly operated food service operation has made steady and noteworthy compliance improvements with a most recent 13% reduction in deficiencies. These gains were made through her efforts to deliver formal and informal training, follow-up visits and partnering with management to make key system changes.

Upon various assessments it was found that many of the tribes lacked emergency preparedness plans for ensuring reliable utilities. Ms. Giroux led a team of engineers and environmental health staff in developing a general emergency preparedness plan that would serve as a template for the Tribes.

Utilizing her safety management background, Ms. Giroux co-developed an ergonomic self-assessment tool that would enable employees to complete a preliminary assessment of their workstation and submit their findings to EH staff and managers. This serves as an educational tool to the employee and highlights conditions most pressing and in need for technical assistance. The self-assessment approach expands our outreach, efficiency and focus on the most pressing ergonomic issues.

District Level Impacts:

Ms. Giroux's ability to mentor and coach EH staff is a tremendous asset to the program as it builds our capacity to continue and expand quality EH services. She quickly learned the web-based environmental health reporting system (WebEHRS) allowing her to train a mentored Tribal Sanitarian and two District staff on the effective and efficient use of the program using tablet computers. In addition, she served as a mentor and coach to one IHS Extern, a JrCOSTEP, and one student Volunteer Intern.

Ms. Giroux serves as the collateral duty Safety Officer at the White Earth Service Unit. She developed policy and advocated for standardized emergency codes in plain language, which would align with efforts for regional standardization in healthcare facilities. This will improve transparency and response efforts by staff, patients and visitors.

Ms. Giroux, along with a staff engineer, reviewed preliminary plans for a new community center (2,352 sq. ft.). Ms. Giroux provided ongoing guidance and input to the Project Manager throughout the process to include technical assistance on the change orders. This ensured the facility met the needs of the Elderly Nutrition Program staff and the requirements outlined by codes (FDA Food Code, NFPA), standards and best practices.

Ms. Giroux serves as a member of a remodeling project team for a 28,830 sq. ft. Congregate Housing Complex. She has provided guidance and input on this project while participating in council meetings and actively engaging the community in an effort to improve living conditions.

Ms. Giroux has assisted the White Earth Nation Early Child Care Program with implementation of two new early child care centers. Environmental health and safety surveys were completed and recommendations were provided to program staff in an effort to assist the program with proper implementation of services and facilities based on standards and best practices.

Ms. Giroux has also assisted Head Start programs by researching and finding safer options for sanitizing solutions. Her research has found options that met both the Head Start needs as well as various regulations such as the FDA Food Code. These findings were provided in the form of guidance documents.

PROFESSIONALISM

Ms. Giroux is a voracious learner and is often looking for and pursuing professional development opportunities. It was this initiative that allowed her to become a NEHA registered EHS within her first year of employment with the Bemidji Area. In addition, she was part of the IHS Office of Environmental Health and Engineering Leadership Training Program (Learning Team Cohort#2). She has completed a Master's of Science in Technology Management through the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology. Her certifications include: NEHA Certified Professional-Food Safety Credential and HAZWOPER.

INNOVATION

Ms. Giroux is an advocate and a technical resource for environmental sustainability initiatives. Per the White Earth Tribe's request she has assisted in securing approximately \$18,000 in start-up funding for community gardening, seed saving and classes on preserving foods. Furthermore, a portion of these start-up funds are being used to support a food truck that will be used to transport local healthy foods into communities otherwise void of these items. Ms. Giroux has engaged this Tribe and coordinated a site visit to an aquaponics operation. The Tribe is currently pursuing this endeavor as another way to expand healthy food choices within their local economy. These capacity building initiatives work towards localizing the food system, which in turn provides a range of Tribal benefits to include: improved nutrition, economy, environment and overall resiliency.

The Bemidji Area IHS, DEHS proudly nominates Ms. Connie Giroux for the Indian Health Service 2014 Environmental Health Specialist of the Year for her leadership, professionalism, innovation and commitment to outstanding EH services to the Tribes within the Bemidji Area IHS.