

**INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE  
2021 ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST OF THE YEAR  
LT BRADEN HICKEY**



**Introduction**

LT Braden Hickey, REHS, MPH, was nominated by the Albuquerque Area Indian Health Service, Office of Environmental Health and Engineering (OEHE), Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) for the 2021 Environmental Health Specialist of the Year. LT Hickey is an Environmental Health Officer assigned to the Taos-Picuris Service Unit (TSU) in the Area's Northern District. LT Hickey also serves as the principal EHO for the Zuni Service Unit (ZSU), providing essential comprehensive Environmental Health (EH) services to a total of six tribal communities with a combined population of approximately 15,000. LT Hickey is most heartily commended for her outstanding leadership, professionalism and dedication to our native communities and the professional assistance she provides to her DEHS teammates. She consistently demonstrates a steadfast commitment to the mission of the IHS through maintaining high quality service while volunteering to take on additional roles, providing support during staffing shortages and spearheading national level-projects. LT Hickey is a highly valued member of the DEHS team and consistently serves as a role model to the Area's EH Specialists.

**Professionalism**

**Advanced Credentials:** LT Hickey obtained her Master's in Public Health from Johns Hopkins University in 2021. In tandem to earning her MPH from Hopkins, she also earned a Certificate in Environmental & Occupational Health, becoming Certified in Public Health (CPH). Additionally, LT Hickey maintains multiple credentials and certifications demonstrating her exceptional knowledge in EH: Registered Environmental Health Specialist (NEHA), Certified Playground Safety Inspector (National Recreation and Parks Association), Child Passenger Safety Technician (Safe Kids World Wide), Certified Food Protection Instructor/Proctor (ServSafe), and Certified Pool Operator (National Swimming Pool Foundation).

**Leadership:** LT Hickey's exemplary performance, commitment and dedication to our tribal communities and her ability to assist/train DEHS staff peers uphold the highest traditions and values of the IHS. Her ability to quickly assume collateral duties in a leadership/mentor capacity have ensured essential public health services continued without interruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. She routinely volunteered for additional duties outside her regularly assigned communities to assist with staffing shortages and is the sole EHO responsible for two (O-4) duty stations – TSU and ZSU. Since March 2021, she has split time between these two service units carrying out comprehensive surveys and providing technical guidance on EH, Industrial Hygiene and Injury Prevention (IP) issues beyond expectation. She is personally responsible for performing ~ 25% of the Area's 2021 field surveys.

Demonstrating exceptional potential, LT Hickey is the designated representative for the Area's IP program, responsible for planning/implementing work impacting +61,000 tribal members. She routinely assists the DEHS director in addressing IP issues due to a vacant O-5 IP billet in the Area office. She attends national IP meetings for the DEHS Director, providing updates to HQ leadership on the Area's IP projects and initiatives. Additionally, she has been working with the DEHS leadership team to create a framework for hiring a full-time IP Specialist.

Displaying remarkable organizational skills, LT Hickey successfully coordinated the comprehensive work load management for two deployers to the Area on respective 30 and 60 day TDY assignments. This critical role included scheduling site visits and supporting the deployers while working in tribal communities during the pandemic. Ensuring mission success, LT Hickey oversaw the completion of +145 TDY inspections, thus allowing DEHS staff to complete critical EH/COVID-19 work and address field vacancies/staffing shortages.

LT Hickey consistently demonstrates an incredible dedication to serving those around her as a mentor, educator and public health leader. She was a Preceptor to the Area's 2021 JrCOSTEP and continues to provide essential mentorship to junior staff. LT Hickey also presented at several state and national level conferences in 2021. She is a known SME for Playground Safety and is our only Area Certified Playground Safety Inspector. She presented her work on Playground Safety in Tribal Communities at the NEHA Annual Education Conference to +100 attendees. During this same conference, she also served as a panel SME presenting on the Navajo Water Access Mission goals, successes and challenges (+70 attendees). She again presented on Playground Safety for NM's Environmental Health Association, increasing visibility of the Area's IP Program with state/local EH professionals. Finally, in 2021 despite extensive competition, the EHOPAC selected LT Hickey as a Voting Member on the EHOPAC for 2022-2024. This is a coveted position for any EHO, especially as a Junior Officer.

### **Special Accomplishments**

***DEHS COVID-19 Workforce Analysis:*** As the pandemic progressed, it was evident EH played a critical role in COVID-19 response and recovery. LT Hickey documented the successes and challenges experienced by DEHS staff nationally. Beginning in January 2021, she worked in collaboration with DEHS HQ and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health to create a national-level workforce assessment questionnaire. In February 2021 she sent her questionnaire to all federal DEHS staff (n=126), garnering 79 responses for a completion rate of 62.7%. LT Hickey then analyzed and compiled the results, creating a 28-page report discussing major themes, summarizing DEHS activities performed and successes/challenges. Afterwards, she presented her preliminary findings to IHS leadership at a DEHS Directors meeting. LT Hickey continued working with DEHS HQ to create a detailed internal report including lessons learned and future recommendations for IHS. She discussed 4 key findings: the scope of COVID-19 work completed by DEHS staff, high rates of burnout, communication successes/challenges, and a need for improved emergency management/training. In September 2021, the final report was distributed to across IHS, and DEHS HQ is working to publish the findings in a peer-reviewed journal.

The results of LT Hickey's project brought to light areas of improvement for the DEHS program nationally. Her report also showcased and promoted EH as a profession, capturing the vital services DEHS staff provided during the pandemic response. Finally, her report highlighted the unique skills EHOs provided during the response.

***Head Start Summit:*** LT Hickey worked to increase availability of the Area's Annual Head Start Summit through an on-demand training series accessible via the Environmental Health Support Center (EHSC) website. During the virtual Summit, LT Hickey recorded each presentation given by staff and then personally reviewed video transcripts to ensure Section 508 compliance. After this, she worked with EHSC, IHS Public Affairs and IT to upload the videos onto the IHS Internal YouTube page, allowing for on-demand access. Not only are these trainings now available to Head Starts within the Albuquerque Area, they are accessible nationally for any Head Start, school or childcare program, ensuring any program nationally can meet annual training requirements. Additionally, her efforts reduced the work burden for DEHS staff, as they no longer put on multiple trainings to accommodate a variety of schedules. Instead, staff refer communities to the interactive online training series.

***Navajo Water Access Mission:*** LT Hickey deployed for 30 days to Gallup, NM for the Navajo Water Access Mission to increase access to potable water in a COVID-19 hot spot. In addition to her regular deployment work, she created a train-the-trainer video for Chapter Officials, CHRs, and other personnel who were in charge of running and maintaining the Water Access Points. Displaying exceptional fortitude, she also helped to develop seven training and informational videos, which are accessible on the NavajoSafeWater.org website. The goal of these videos was to help increase awareness about the project and ensure long-term sustainability after USPHS Mission Teams were no longer onsite. Since posting, these videos have been viewed over 1,000 times. LT Hickey volunteered to continue to support this mission post-deployment by scheduling Chapter site visits for incoming deployment teams and providing guidance to deployers, ensuring there were no delays during team transitions.

### **Summary**

LT Hickey is an outstanding and valuable Environmental Health Officer for the Albuquerque Area. Her ability to immediately assume multiple leadership roles when called upon is a testament to her professionalism and capability. LT Hickey excels at routine EH field work, can balance completing national-level projects and enjoys participating as a leader within the Area. Her technical expertise and ability to develop strong relationships with her tribal partners allows her to provide the highest quality EH services to the communities she serves.