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Jr. COSTEP Summer 2008
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In the fall of 2007, I listened as my friend and classmate told me about his experiences as a junior COSTEP in Colorado. The opportunity sounded too good to be true, so I investigated. All of my professors were very enthusiastic about the COSTEP program and encouraged me to apply since my major, Environmental Health, requires an internship to be completed during the summer. I decided that instead of settling for a local internship, I might as well go big and move out west for the summer.



I applied for the Environmental Health Officer JRCOSTEP position in the Indian Health Service in December. I had no real preference as to where I would be stationed. Eventually, my application went through and I was informed that I would be working in downtown Phoenix at the Phoenix Indian Medical Center. This was a big surprise to me. I was planning on living and doing fieldwork in an isolated reservation town. Instead, I would be working in a hospital in the fifth largest city in America. I had some initial qualms about the job since my education had been focused more on environmental chemistry and the Phoenix Indian Medical Center position related more to safety.

Any uncertainties I had about the position at Phoenix Indian Medical Center were cleared after I talked to my supervisors CAPT Dave McMahon and CDR Dave Cramer. I was impressed by the way they spoke to me in a professional, yet very open and friendly manner. They encouraged me that not only would I learn about safety in healthcare, but I would also get some opportunities to participate in fieldwork on reservations. I was impressed with their flexibility and their desire to

fit the job for my specific situation. The job description sounded great and I was excited to be moving to a new place for the summer.

It was a great experience to work for IHS in a big city like Phoenix. My apartment, which I shared with another COSTEP was within a twelve-minute drive from my office and was located near downtown Scottsdale and Tempe. There were a lot of opportunities for recreation after work. The Phoenix area is surrounded by mountains, which offer excellent hikes and beautiful views (as long as you avoid the hot parts of the day, which in Phoenix is most of the day)!

My job at Phoenix Indian Medical Center dealt mainly with safety and compliance. Hospitals must be compliant with several different codes of regulation, and it was the Environmental Health and Safety Officer's job to enforce these codes. The job is always interesting because new and unique situations come up every day, and the safety officer must often make decisions based on judgment rather than existing protocol. Some examples of these situations were a killer bee infestation and a battery acid spill. We analyze the risk associated with the situation and find the best way to protect employees and patients. I also worked on an ongoing project throughout the summer in which I analyzed the ability of the hospital to provide safe care for morbidly obese patients. I was involved in several other ongoing tasks. I conducted three formaldehyde safety trainings to twenty-five nurses over the summer. Also, for the first time in my life I had the chance to pull fire alarms; I conducted twelve fire drills at PIMC and the surrounding buildings.

As part of my COSTEP experience, I traveled to two reservations to participate in fieldwork. First, I hiked eight miles down into the Grand Canyon and spent 5 nights in the town of Supai (the most isolated town in the country)! There I taught a food handler safety course and participated in several inspections of the cafés and other food service establishments in the town. At the end of the week, I was flown out of the canyon in a helicopter! The week after that, I traveled to the Apache reservation and stayed in the town of San Carlos. There I participated in a tick eradication project in which I drove a government vehicle door to door and spread pesticides around the perimeter of over 100 houses. Most families had dogs with serious tick infestations, so I fitted them with flea and tick collars. The purpose of this project was to protect the people from an outbreak of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever that had already caused one death. This

fieldwork gave me a chance to experience first-hand the impoverished living conditions on reservations.

One of my favorite qualities of the Indian Health Service was the working atmosphere and the attitudes of other employees. The working atmosphere at Phoenix Indian Medical Center is intense and professional. However, employees are professional in a manner that is welcoming and friendly, rather than formal and impersonal. The connections I made with my coworkers are valuable to me and to my career. I was impressed by the work ethics and knowledge of my fellow employees. As a result of their guidance, I developed skills that will allow me to be successful in many different aspects of life. More importantly, however, I discovered many role models that have encouraged me to go far in life and make the best of any career I decide to pursue.

As a result of my incredible COSTEP experience, a career with IHS will be a strong consideration when I enter the job market.