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This summer, I was accepted into the United States Public Health Service Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (JRCOSTEP). I was selected to work for Indian Health Service (IHS) at the Reno District Office of Environmental Health and Engineering in Sparks, Nevada from May 18th through August 14th. I could write a novel about the experience and life lessons I have gained from this adventure but I will summarize instead!



From the first day I stepped foot in my new office I was put to work using some of the knowledge and skills I have already gained from my first year in graduate school. I participated in many food inspections for Tribal entities such as Elder Nutrition Programs, Summer Food Service Programs, and Day Care facilities. I taught Safe Food Handling courses to Tribal members who serve food in the different programs, and I provided a hand washing demonstration to the children in a local Summer Food Service Program. I even inspected a Taco Bell that was located on Tribal land.

Another aspect of Indian Health Service, in addition to Environmental Health, is Injury Prevention. My work in this subject included conducting seatbelt surveillances on the reservations, attending suicide prevention meetings with Tribal Health Administrators, and entering epidemiological data for Tribal summary reports. I also participated in an occupational survey at a vocational school that focused on the safety conditions in the different classroom settings that included construction, welding, and machining.

During my internship, I had a few opportunities to travel. First, I went to Owens Valley, California to assist in Rabies vaccination clinics with a USDA veterinarian. This was probably my favorite experience since my undergraduate degree was Pre-Veterinary Medicine! I also got to travel to Phoenix for a week in July for an area workshop meeting. This was a great experience because I got to meet a lot of people who work for Indian Health Service and hear about many different experiences others have had. During the workshop, I gave a power point presentation on my COSTEP experience to the entire Phoenix area Indian Health Service! This was a good opportunity for me to reflect on my time as a COSTEP and to practice my public speaking skills!

My supervisor, Captain Gina Pahona, did a great job of helping me settle in and making me feel welcome in the office. She kept me very busy and made sure everything I experienced was used as an opportunity to learn. I spent the majority of my time in the field and was never confined to my desk with piles of “busy work” to complete just

because I was the intern. I truly have no complaints about this program except that I had to leave!

I discovered a lot about myself during this internship as well. I learned how to be truly independent as I was living by myself in a city that I had never been to before. In the beginning of the summer while in the office, I had a lot to learn. Although I have finished a year of graduate school, my undergraduate degree is Biology, not Environmental Health, so there were some basic ideas related to the field that I had to learn. I found the work fascinating though, so it did not take long to catch up to speed! While in the office, I tried to take initiative to do things on my own where possible and trust my instincts that I knew the right answers.

Overall, this has been one of the most life changing experiences I have ever had. In fact, I will be applying to this program again for next summer and I am even considering Alaska as my location! I am so grateful I was given this opportunity. It has helped me set my future plans in motion as I will definitely be joining the United States Public Health Service upon graduation and I hope to have the opportunity to work for the Indian Health Service again!