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Jr. COSTEP Summer 2010
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During the summer of 2010, I served as a Jr. COSTEP with the Division of Environmental Health for the Bemidji Area Indian Health Service. This position has provided me with numerous valuable experiences in the field of environmental health.

In my first week on the job, I was immediately tasked to work with LTJG Megan Arndt, a Commissioned Officer assigned to the Minnesota District Office. I helped her instruct a food handler's training course for a Boys and Girls Club chapter on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota. This instruction was followed by inspections of Boys and Girls Club kitchen facilities. I feel that this was an appropriate introduction into the world of food surveys, as these facilities were relatively few deficiencies and small. Additionally, reviewing materials to help instruct food handler's training was a great way to familiarize myself with the FDA food code.



After getting my feet wet with food handler's training, I moved on to something completely different (for awhile). I spent some of my time over the next week surveying solid waste transfer stations on the White Earth reservation with my coworker LTJG Tim Taylor, a Commissioned Officer working for the Area Office. From there, we conducted fire safety and fire extinguisher training for general staff members at the White Earth Clinic, where Tim serves as the safety officer. I then returned to food surveys with the White Earth Powwow, which took place on the weekend of June 11th, 2010. This was a good follow-up experience to the food handler's training and B&G Club kitchen surveys. I was able to apply skills I had learned from those experiences to a large number of temporary food vendors which were present at this celebration.

After the White Earth Powwow, I spent another week or two performing surveys with LTJG Taylor. We surveyed a food warehouse, a Subway sandwich restaurant, an assisted living facility, and an elderly nutrition program's kitchen all on the Mille Lacs reservation. We then performed two hazard surveillance and accreditation preparation surveys: one at Lake Lena health center in Mille Lacs, and one at White Earth Clinic in White Earth. I found the latter surveys particularly interesting due to my unfamiliarity with environmental health in the healthcare setting.

During the week of June 21st, 2010, I attended a training course in Duluth, MN. This course covered Life Safety/Accreditation and OSHA topics, and was made possible by the Environmental Health Support Center. Part of this training addressed what Joint Commission (JCAHO) and, to an extent, Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care (AAAHC), look for regarding the Life Safety Code during the accreditation process. This was very timely, having just conducted two accreditation preparation surveys, and I found it to be very informative and interesting. The second half of the training was a 10-hour OSHA training. Like the first half of the training, I found this half to be informative and interesting – although, unlike the accreditation half, it was because I had very little occupational exposure to things OSHA-related. Another aspect of the training course which I enjoyed was the networking aspect. I made fast friends with LTJG Scott Daly and fellow Jr. COSTEP Heather Foster, both of whom were out of the Rhinelander district office, and had some interesting conversations with tribal facility managers and the OSHA topics instructor.



After returning from the training, I worked with my preceptor, LCDR Tim Duffy, to perform some air-related surveys at local facilities. The first was an assessment of negative pressure rooms at White Earth Clinic to help prepare for their then-upcoming accreditation. The second was an assessment of indoor air quality at Red Lake Hospital, wherein some employees had been complaining of symptoms which were potentially related to the quality of indoor air. The quality of indoor air is impacted by numerous factors, and the assessment therefore requires the consideration and investigation of a large number of variables. This was somewhat contrary to previous surveys I had helped perform, which were relatively narrow in scope (e.g. linking the FDA Food Code to observations made in a restaurant, or linking the NFPA Life Safety Code to observations made in a facility). For this reason, I particularly enjoyed these assessments because they employed my problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

To conduct the indoor air quality assessment, we checked supply and return air for different vents, physically inspected walls and carpeting where roof leaks had caused water damage, and checked in the ceiling for any signs of microbial growth.

Meanwhile, my exposure to other elements of the environmental health program continued to broaden. I spent a day with Carolyn Garcia, the District sanitarian with the Minnesota District Office, to survey a pool in the Fond du Lac reservation. The next day, I accompanied LTJGs Arndt and Taylor to perform a general hazard survey of the Shooting Star casino on the White Earth reservation. This was another great experience – we inspected lodging, the RV park, casino floor, maintenance areas, pool, health spa, and fitness center. I had no idea that all of these facilities were inspected, and I was exposed to safety and health issues unique to each facility type.

Most recently, I have been conducting fit-testing at different hospitals in the area. The fit-testing I performed was for N-95 respirators (used to protect healthcare workers from airborne diseases such as tuberculosis or avian influenza) using a TSI Porta-Count. I performed fit-testing at Red Lake Hospital with Christine Ostrom, the Red Lake tribal sanitarian, at Cass Lake Hospital on the Leech Lake reservation with CAPT Amy Buckanaga, a Commissioned Corps nursing supervisor, and one day at Nett Lake Clinic on the Bois Forte reservation with co-worker LTJG Taylor. I enjoyed fit-testing because it allowed the opportunity to talk with a variety of healthcare workers and get some interesting perspectives on healthcare.

Between surveying and fit-testing, I spent time in the office. Much of my time was spent writing reports – and learning how to properly write them and cite code (a hearty thanks to my patient coworkers!). I also worked on a variety of projects, which were hopefully useful to the area or Minnesota District Office. I helped create a standard operating procedure for solid waste transfer station operators, a safety checklist to be used as a supplement when surveying casinos, compiled area WEBCident data and analyzed it for trends, compiled area WISQARS injury data and analyzed it for trends, and created fact sheets for Executive Order 13514 with goal overviews and inclusion of both general and tribal best practices to help reach those goals. These fact sheets will hopefully serve as environmental management systems for various Area offices, and help facilities become more environmentally friendly.

My Jr. COSTEP officially ends on August 28th, 2010. For now, I have the following activities scheduled: presenting my summer activities at the area's JrCOSTEP symposium, another round of foodhandler's training, another powwow, possibly accompanying a tribal sanitarian to help survey a criminal justice center, and possibly shadowing my preceptor for an x-ray survey. I'll also be finishing up some on-going projects in the office.

My experience as a JrCOSTEP for the summer of 2010 was a tremendous learning experience. I had not had an environmental health internship before, and this position provided me with some key experiences necessary for a career in environmental health. Additionally, serving with an agency whose scope is very broad (i.e. with IHS rather than city/county public health departments or private industry) gave me practical experience with relatively unique environmental health niches, such as indoor air quality and clinic accreditation, which I otherwise might not have been exposed to. The tribal relations aspect of this internship was also very interesting, and in my opinion, invaluable. Being able to work with people is a core element of the environmental health field.

I would like to end this narrative with advice for future Jr. COSTEPS and their preceptors: Try to work with as many different coworkers as possible. I am saying this not because I disliked any of my coworkers, but rather because each individual in the workplace brings unique assets to the table. A health surveyor will emphasize different aspects of a survey dependent on his or her personal interests and background. Thus, accompanying as many individuals as possible on surveys will provide a Jr. COSTEP with a rich, well-rounded understanding of environmental health.