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Jr. COSTEP Summer 2010
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I was fortunate during the summer of 2010 to work with the Indian Health Service (IHS) as a participant of the Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (JRCOSTEP). This experience gave me a feel for the working life of an environmental health professional and it fulfilled curriculum requirements for my Master in Public Health degree.



I became aware of the JRCOSTEP program from a job description posted in my degree-granting institution's department of public health. I applied for an environmental health internship and an opening in the Olympic District Office in Bremerton, Washington turned out to be a good fit for me. After some confusion caused by new legislation that put the JRCOSTEP program in limbo for a couple of months, everything was resolved and I was officially an ensign in the U.S. Public Health Service's Commissioned Corps.

In the three short months of working within the Division of Environmental Health Services of the IHS, I learned a lot about working in the field of environmental health. I learned about the relationship between U.S. government agencies and Indian tribes, as well as the private sector. I found a practical application for all of the knowledge I have gained during my studies of public health and the sciences. I gained excellent experience in conducting facility surveys on Indian reservations under the tutelage of my supervisor, CDR Karin Knopp.



During inspections of food and beverage establishments, casinos, a school, a wastewater treatment facility, and a water park; I became knowledgeable about the facets that make a facility a risk to public health and the modifications that can improve safety. I was responsible for compiling the reports for most of the facilities that Karin and I surveyed. She reviewed these reports and showed me how to convey public health information in a way that is concise, yet allows the reader to fully understand deficiencies and proper remedial actions. I also created a guide to foodborne illness for supervisors of food and beverage establishments based on the FDA Food Code. This guide will help supervisors identify levels of risk of a foodborne illness outbreak among their employees as well as actions that will effectively lower this risk.

Overall, this summer was full of new experiences that I will find hard to forget. In the northeastern U.S., where I am from, the Indian reservations are few, and those that do exist are small and are rarely discussed in conversation. In the Puget Sound area, where the tribes I visited were located, the Indian reservations are widespread and they have much greater influence. Also, while I was in the beautiful northwestern U.S., I made sure to explore the temperate rainforests, the river valleys, the high peaks, and the urban areas of Seattle and Portland.

To anyone interested in being a part of the COSTEP program for a summer: I encourage you to go for it!