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Jr COSTEP Summer 2011
Western Carolina University
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The U.S. Public Health Service and the Albuquerque Region Indian Health Service provided me with an exceptional opportunity as a JrCOSTEP, during the summer of 2011. As a rising senior in Western Carolina University's Environmental Health program, with prospects of continuing on to graduate school, I had been yearning for a chance to gain real-world experience and apply my foundation of knowledge obtained through my coursework. This was the perfect opportunity.

Being originally from Albuquerque, I was thrilled to have been stationed at the IHS Albuquerque Area Office (AAO) within the Office of Environmental Health and Engineering (OEHE). More specifically, I was anxious to work with Jerry Lee, the Injury Prevention Specialist and Leisa Cook, Director of Environmental Health. Considering my brief five and a half weeks of duty, they made certain that I was exposed to a variety of activities to encompass the broad spectrum of environmental health services offered to the tribes, the agency's duties, and the overall mission of IHS.

The Albuquerque Area Office services 27 separate tribal governments, including chapters of Navajo Nation, Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute tribes in southern CO, and the Ysleta Del Sur reservation in northern TX. As a result of this wide-spread population, the responsibility for every service unit is on the shoulders of the Albuquerque Area Office, requiring constant communication and superior cooperation. Furthermore, because of the non-regulatory nature of IHS, it is crucial for environmental health specialists to travel out to each pueblo and village and, in a sense, "sell" their services to the tribal members in order to achieve the utmost cooperation. It is this development of this trusting relationship that adds another dimension to the job of an environmental health specialist, which is so unique to IHS among any other governmental or private agency.



As an Injury Prevention intern working with Mr. Lee, I was involved with numerous activities and events. I attended meetings with several groups, such as the NM Elder Fall Coalition, the Tribal Community Injury Prevention Coalition (TCIPC), and the NM Injury Prevention Certification Task Force. These opened my eyes to local issues facing the communities. Likewise, I attended and presented at the NM Child Fatality Review panel meeting after conducting case research at the Office of Medical Investigators (OMI) at the NM Scientific Laboratory. I assisted in child car seat and rabies vaccination clinics, which proved to be the most visible displays of injury prevention at work for the communities. Also within injury prevention, I worked on various projects, such as the creation of databases and compendiums, as well as revisions of some pre-existing educational material. Each of these activities provided me with knowledge or hands-on experience, giving me a comprehensive idea of what injury prevention is and its importance within tribal communities.

I was also given the opportunity to explore the multifarious world of general environmental health. My varied activities included two FEMA training sessions (Preparedness/Points of Distribution and Sheltering), food booth surveys during Feast Day festivities, assistance with the Tribal Satellite Phone program, accompanying an engineering JrCOSTEP to a well-drilling site, and even insitutional environmental health tasks (general hospital surveys, x-ray survelliance, and air quality monitoring).

Throughout these experiences, I was able to apply and build on my knowledge from my academic coursework, as well wear the hats from several environmental health specialities. One of the most

significant occurrences during my assignment was the wildfire crisis that swept the West. The fires endangered several of the tribes and engulfed over hundreds of thousands of acres of land. As a result, I was able to observe emergency management at its best, as the Albuquerque Area Office handled prevention and the repercussions of this crisis. Not only was cooperation seen at the federal and state levels, but also at the community level.

Overall, I gained a greater understanding of the mission and goal of IHS, the complexities and importance of American Indian culture, was supplied with hands-on experience within the various aspects of environmental heath (including injury prevention), as well as wisdom and comaradery, and the confidence that this is the career I wish to pursue. With this confidence, the U.S. Public Health Service has provided a viable career option. I have had an invaluable experience, having been able to take what I've learned in courses and textbooks and apply it in real-world settings.

