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Jr. COSTEP Summer 2014
Old Dominion University
Whiteriver Service Unit
Whiteriver, Arizona**

My name is Elena Ficklen and I am currently a senior at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia. I am majoring in Environmental Health and I plan to graduate in December. This summer I was stationed in Whiteriver, Arizona with my preceptor, LT Kelsey Hustedt, at the Office of Environmental Health and Engineering (OEHE). Over the summer I primarily worked with the White Mountain Apache Tribe, but I also had the opportunity to visit the San Carlos Apache Reservation. When I began this internship, I did not know what to expect as I had never been on a reservation before. I believe this internship was unique from any other opportunity as I not only gained work and field experience as an Environmental Health Officer (EHO), but I also worked with and learned about a culture that was entirely new to me. Through this experience I have learned about the practical applications of environmental health, and also gained life experiences that I will never forget.



ENS Ficklen at Fort Apache, Arizona.

I was busy from my very first day and all summer long. This was not an internship in which I was only allowed to observe others; I was actively involved in a wide variety of EHO tasks. One of the chief responsibilities of IHS EHOs is conducting food service sanitation (FSS) and institutional environmental health (IEH) surveys. This summer I assisted in conducting several IEH surveys including a detention center, schools, a children's



241 dogs and cats were vaccinated during the June rabies vaccination clinics.

shelter, an elder feeding site, a fitness center, rental cabins, and a hotel. The FSS surveys were my favorite field work. I completed a food safety course at ODU last semester, and the things I learned were still fresh in my mind. This made me feel comfortable and confident in assisting and answering questions. Other surveys included two swimming pools, three campgrounds, and numerous temporary food vendors. I learned that inspections of temporary food vendors were a valuable opportunity to interact with the community. During the inspections I watched fry bread and other traditional foods being made, I listened to life stories, and I made some new friends.

In June, our office sponsored a four-day rabies vaccination clinic in several different communities on the reservation. Two hundred forty one dogs and cats were vaccinated that week. We also collared 109 dogs with an eight-month Seresto tick collar that controls the tick that causes Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) and assisted the RMSF Prevention Program with dog registration. Despite the heat and long days, this was a fun and educational week. It was an eye opening experience because I have never seen so many animals in such poor condition before this internship.

Other EHO related activities I was involved in this summer included assisting in teaching food handler training classes, assisting with a quality assurance testing at the Tribal water lab, assisting with a home inspection, conducting numerous animal bite investigations, conducting occupant restraint surveys, participating in RMSF

and elder fall prevention coalition meetings, and attending a safety conference to provide technical assistance regarding car seat use and safety. I also created two informational brochures on septic system care and food vendor safety, and updated the OEHE itinerant food vendor inspection form.

One of my key projects this summer involved conducting interviews of EHOs who have been involved with RMSF prevention over the past

twelve years, since its emergence. I conducted 16 key informant interviews of EHOs from IHS and CDC, both in person and by phone. A similar project was done by a COSTEP in 2009 which documented the first six years of EHO involvement, and I replicated her methods. The goal was to collect information about how each person contributed to RMSF prevention in terms of the activities they participated in or initiated. The COSTEP in 2009 reported there were three major roles that EHOs typically occupied in their work with RMSF: Facilitator, Field Support, and Health Educator. After conducting the interviews and compiling my data, I came to the conclusion that these are still the three key roles EHOs fill in RMSF prevention, and many fill all of these roles concurrently. I also concluded an additional role has evolved among EHOs who have been involved with RMSF prevention, or are in locations that have been affected by RMSF, for over six years. I felt privileged to be involved with this project and to contribute a small part to the work that has been done by these EHOs.

My summer was not all work and no play. I spent my weekends and annual leave enjoying the incredible Arizona countryside. I hiked around four Arizona National Parks: Petrified Forest, Sunset Crater, Walnut Canyon, and Wupatki Ruins. I also visited Tucson, Phoenix, and Sedona. When my parents visited me in July we went to the Grand Canyon together, and this was my favorite trip. Other fun cultural activities outside of work included visiting the Kinishba Ruins and Cultural Center at Fort Apache, being invited to a Sunrise Dance, and attending a Pow Wow.



ENS Ficklen checking the temperatures of potentially hazardous foods during a FSS survey.



ENS Ficklen and her mother at the Grand Canyon.

In conclusion I would like to say how very fortunate I feel to have had the opportunity to learn so much this summer. It was a truly invaluable experience. Once I began to venture out alone in the field, I realized that one of my favorite parts of this job was interacting one-on-one with the community members. It brought me out of my comfort zone and gave me so much confidence in my future abilities as an environmental health professional.