

**ENS Curtis Rodgers
JRCOSTEP Summer 2015
University of Washington
Santa Fe District Office
Santa Fe, New Mexico**



Enjoying the views on Wheeler Peak

My name is Curtis Rodgers and I am on track to graduate with a BS in Environmental Health from the University of Washington in June of 2016. I am studying Environmental Health because it has long been a goal and passion of mine to work with underserved populations around the US and the world to overcome health disparities. When the opportunity to be a JRCOSTEP at the Santa Fe District Office, of the Albuquerque Area Indian Health Service (IHS) presented itself, I quickly accepted. Although I knew little about the IHS and USPHS Commissioned Corps, the opportunity to work in environmental health for an agency that focuses on underrepresented communities in the US grabbed my attention.

The Santa Fe District serves 14 different tribes in Northern New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah with four Environmental Health (EH) Officers. As an EH Officer, I was under the supervision of my preceptor CDR Jeff Dickson. Throughout the summer I also worked alongside many other staff members in the Albuquerque Area Office, Community Health Representatives from tribal communities, and many others. My work as a COSTEP consisted of a variety of environmental health topics including disease prevention, food safety and sanitation surveys, health education and advocacy, injury prevention, and built environment safety.



Rabies clinic at Nambe Pueblo

Disease prevention consisted primarily of rabies clinics and foodborne illness prevention. As someone that is not particularly fond of canines or felines, rabies clinics forced me to quell my disinterest in getting close to pets and sticking an unwanted needle into their backs. More importantly, however, rabies clinics were a significant intervention in preventing the transmission of rabies to humans, an occurrence that is incredibly fatal. The opportunity to be out in the community and develop a rapport with tribal members and officials alike really stood out to me in rabies clinics. Further, and perhaps a little less importantly, it forced me to overcome a fear of mine and made me a much better candidate to be a potential husband of a dog-loving spouse.

I also worked indirectly preventing disease by way of food surveys. These surveys took place at restaurants on tribal lands as well as food vendors at feast days, powwows, and other tribal events. Easily one of the highlights of my COSTEP, food surveys not only allowed me to witness some fascinating and unique cultural traditions but it also granted me the opportunity to be out in the communities we serve and get to know several tribal members on a personal level. I developed a



Food vendor survey

routine for surveys and my knowledge of safe food handling practices grew tremendously as the summer went on. In the case of permanent establishments, I would enter the survey results into WebEHRS, an online database of IHS work provided to tribes. I also co-conducted several institutional surveys at facilities such as women and infant centers, elder centers, community recreation facilities, and food distribution programs.

Health education and advocacy was a reoccurring theme over the summer as well. I spent considerable time working on educational modules – that will eventually be posted online – for community members on important environmental health topics such as child passenger safety, safe practices for making jerky, the process of selling food off tribal land, and tularemia prevention. I also helped to promote the consumption of fluoridated drinking water in a community health fair where we attempted to persuade community members that drinking tap water was a healthier, cheaper, and non-recognizable (taste-wise) alternative to bottled water.



Fluoride advocacy at Tesuque Pueblo Health Fair

Lastly, I contributed to Native American Passenger Safety (NAPS), a program designed to improve child passenger safety (CPS) among tribal youth. Part of my responsibilities in working on NAPS has been to help create an interactive mapping system that will help track CPS advances and deficiencies among tribal communities to better understand where improvements are needed and the most effective ways CPS can be improved.

Over the course of my COSTEP in Santa Fe, I was also involved with several environmental health practices including food handlers training, head start summits, and various other related tasks. In many ways, CDR Dickson's trademark quote during food code surveys ("we're just here making sure everyone's making money and staying healthy!") epitomized the full responsibilities I assumed as a COSTEP this summer. As an Environmental Health Officer, it was my job to help facilitate and improve the day-to-day lives of American Indians and help them prosper; the means of this was environmental public health.

My COSTEP granted me everything I could have asked for. It gave me a look into the working environment and responsibilities of an EH professional, an opportunity to help better the lives of underrepresented tribal communities, an experience working for a government agency and as a USPHS uniformed officer, a home in a unique part of the country, a tremendous opportunity to see and learn about American Indian cultures, and the opportunity to be surrounded by wonderful people at work every day. I highly recommend a COSTEP to environmental health students looking for an intensive and valuable internship experience in the environmental health field. Lastly, I would like to take the time to thank the USPHS Commissioned Corps for the opportunity to be a JRCOSTEP; the staff members in the Santa Fe District Office that welcomed me into their community; and thank you to CDR Jeff Dickson for selecting me to be a COSTEP and for bringing an infectious and upbeat personality to the office every day and introducing me to the nuances of being an Environmental Health Officer.