

**ENS Michael Vicente
JRCOSTEP Summer 2015
Illinois State University
Great Plains Area Office
Aberdeen, South Dakota**

I am Michael Vicente a senior studying Environmental Health Science at Illinois State University. My last requirement for a Bachelor's degree is to complete an internship to gain professional experience. The first time I heard of the Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (COSTEP) it was from my professor, CAPT George Byrns, USPHS (Ret). He would often mention his career in the Indian Health Service (IHS) during lectures and he advised many of his students to pursue a COSTEP opportunity. Before the deadline to find an internship CDR Mike Reed, USPHS, came to the Illinois State University campus to recruit students to apply for the COSTEP. CDR Reed came to the University at the request of professor Byrns and he spoke to us about the opportunities with the Indian Health Service. The COSTEP opportunity sounded like the experience I was looking for, so I spoke with CDR Reed after his presentation. He told me more about the Great Plains Area DEHS program and where his District service area was located. Following our conversation he suggested that I apply for the COSTEP which I immediately did. Several months later I was very excited to receive conformation of acceptance and orders to report for duty at the Great Plains Area (GPA) Office in Aberdeen, SD. It was such a relief to get that confirmation call, especially after the long application process, months of waiting, and having to turning down an internship with a local health department that would have fulfilled my final course requirement.



On the first day, I was very nervous to meet my preceptors the GPA Director of Environmental Health Services, CAPT Chris Allen, and the Area Staff Environmental Health Specialist Mr. Tim Balderrama. They both were very welcoming and forthcoming in sharing their public health



Assessing the depth of sand for fall shock protection at a playground.

knowledge with me. My training started quickly after introductions which set the pace for the duration of the summer. This internship location averaged two to three days of traveling out to communities per week. The closest location I traveled to was an hour and a half away from the Area Office. Over the course of my internship, I traveled to seven of the sixteen reservations in the GPA, which took me to Iowa, Nebraska, and North Dakota.

During my COSTEP I was able to gain a variety of environmental health experiences and I quickly developed from a student in training, to an employee entrusted to conduct surveys of my own. The scope of solo and joint survey work included food establishments, day care centers, Head Starts, gaming/casino operations, hotel/motels, and food warehouse facilities. The survey process and

report writing process brought me a better understanding of the 2013 FDA Model Food Code and the NFPA 101 Life Safety Code.

Another part of my COSTEP experience was to teach food safety courses to local food handlers working at local restaurants, day care centers, and powwow food booths. In some situations food handler education was done during surveys as a way to reinforce recommended corrective actions. We also did training programs by request of the employers through presentations at a later date.



Food survey for an Elderly Nutrient Program.

Other parts of the internship included assisting with documenting pets receiving rabies vaccinations during Rural Area Veterinary Service (RAVS) clinics; conducting severe injury surveillance system data entry, and carrying out seat belt surveillance surveys using the IHS protocol.

My major project was to improve processes for preventing foodborne illness risk factors in tribal food service operations within the GPA. This was done by comparing the number of top five risk factors identified by me using the 2013 FDA Food Code in seven food service facilities on five reservations. After the survey was completed I compared the violations I found to the previous survey findings. Once it was determined which risk factors were most common, I developed recommendations the Area could focus on to help control these issues.

I could not have asked for a better COSTEP experience, and location to have been stationed. I really enjoyed the public health work and the opportunity to work alongside so many talented and dedicated people. My COSTEP has provided me with valuable public health experience and professional confidence which will ease the transition from student to working professional. The Great Plains Area and the reservations I have worked with have all been places that I wish to visit and work with in the future. The staff I have had the opportunity to work alongside have been very knowledgeable and the most welcoming people I have ever met.

I would strongly encourage other students to apply for the COSTEP. Especially if they like a wide variety of professional work experiences, excellent mentoring, and an opportunities to work with new cultures. I would strongly encourage them to consider the Great Plains Area for all of these opportunities.



Caught my first Northern Pike.



4th of July Pow Wow.



Statue at the Winnebago Reservation.