

ENS Victoria Miller
JRCOSTEP Summer 2015
Missouri Southern State University
Northwest Washington Indian Health Board
Bellingham, Washington

My name is Victoria Miller and this fall I will finish my Environmental Health and Safety degree at Missouri Southern State University (MSSU) in Joplin, Missouri. This summer I completed a JRCOSTEP with the Indian Health Service (IHS) and the Northwest Washington Indian Health Board (NWWIHB) in Bellingham, Washington. The NWWIHB provides comprehensive environmental health and injury prevention services to enhance the health and quality of life for the benefit of its five member tribes. The NWWIHB serves the Lummi Nation, Nooksack, Upper Skagit, Samish and Swinomish Tribal communities. I worked with the tribes on a variety of environmental health and safety issues.



The experience I gained while working at the NWWIHB is so valuable and indispensable in helping me to start my career in environmental health. The job tasks I assisted with included conducting food service surveys at various tribal establishments, as well as conducting daycare surveys. I provided an array of professions training that included Food Handler's, OSHA's Bloodborne Pathogen and Hazard Communication Standards. I also updated trainings to ensure that they were updated in compliance with new and existing codes.

I observed ongoing testing on a well that had been deemed unsafe by the EPA. We also received several complaints about people camping on land that they did not own, leaving behind human and solid waste. We worked with the land owners and tribal officials to create a plan for safe removal of the waste.

One of the most interesting inquiries we received was a request to conduct a home inspection with the county building inspector to determine if the home was safe to occupy. The home was located on a bluff that is quickly eroding away! I also had the opportunity to work with kids and their parents. I assisted on several child passenger safety checks and helped to educate parents on proper car seat usage. I did not realize how much parents need to know about car seats! I also worked with kids and community members at a bicycle rodeo. I talked to kids and other community members about pedestrian and bicycle safety, as well as provided helmets to those who did not have a helmet. I helped fit more than 35 children and adults with helmets.

I learned how to read and interpret codes, survey different types of facilities and write reports/surveys for each facility. One of the most important lessons I learned was how to communicate and build professional relationships with facility owners and their employees. The presentations/trainings I gave helped me to be more comfortable in a public speaking environment. I also was exposed to material such as the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) codes which are used when surveying facilities. I was not familiar with NFPA from my previous environmental health classes and was eager to learn more about it.

The hands-on experience was a vital part of my COSTEP experience. I was able to apply many of the concepts that I have learned in the classroom, which helped me to understand and apply concepts. My preceptor, LCDR Stephanie Coffey, taught me so many different things in the area of environmental health, public health, injury prevention, the Indian Health Service and the U.S. Public Health Service. I gained invaluable knowledge by listening and discussing different environmental health topics with her and with other people working for the tribes.

Not only was my COSTEP an educational experience, but also an opportunity to experience the Pacific Northwest. My duty station in Bellingham, Washington, is a 31-hour drive from my hometown of Olathe, Kansas. I had never traveled this far west before my COSTEP. Bellingham is 90 miles north of Seattle and 20 miles from the Canadian Border. I was able to visit and see so many different areas during the summer. I went Seattle to see some of the tourist



attractions like the Space Needle and Pike Place Market. It was fun watching the “guys” throw the fish. I visited Victoria, BC, by taking a ferry from Washington over to the island. I went on my first kayaking adventure and kayaked around the San Juan Islands. Bellingham has 60 miles of interurban trails that I could explore anytime I wanted! Exploring Northwest Washington and Canada was another amazing benefit. I am not sure that I would have been able to see this part of the county had I not applied for a COSTEP.

Overall my COSTEP experience allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and push myself to do something new and completely different. If anyone is considering applying for a COSTEP, I would highly recommend it. Not only does one gain invaluable experience in the area of environmental health, but exposure to a variety of environmental health topics as well. In addition to gaining valuable work experience, you have an opportunity to see and explore a different part of the country that you may have never been to before. I could not have asked for a better experience and am grateful for the opportunity to have completed a COSTEP.