

Jackson Runte
JRCOSTEP Summer 2016
Colorado State University
Shiprock District Office
Shiprock, New Mexico



My name is Jackson Runte. I am a senior at Colorado State University (CSU) where I am studying environmental health sciences. I first heard about the JRCOSTEP from my advisor, Erin Reichert, who recommended that I apply. I was ready to apply the moment Erin explained to me how this program would give me travel orders to anywhere in the United States. The more I read into the internship description, the more excited I became. It seemed to be a great adventure so I started an application almost immediately!

The application process was quite rigorous, but well worth it. I received information telling me that I had been assigned to Indian Health Service (IHS) in Shiprock, New Mexico to work on the Navajo Nation. I quickly started to research Shiprock and the Navajo Nation to learn more about where I would be spending my summer. Shiprock is much smaller than my home in Colorado, and I was worried about living in what I believed at the time was “the middle of nowhere” for an entire summer. These initial thoughts were to be quickly proven wrong. The following 10 weeks were what I would consider to be the most important and life changing summer of my life.

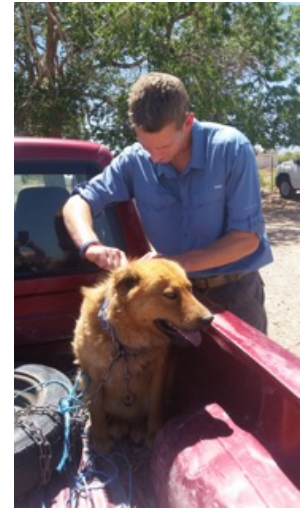
During my orientation, I learned about the various projects and work I would be completing this summer. From my schedule I could see that some of my work for IHS would correspond with my class work at CSU. I would be given the opportunity to work with diseases such as hantavirus, plague, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. A large portion of my work would also include food, kitchen, and building surveys; as well as rabies clinics. Some of the more minor aspects of my job would be participating in meetings, completing seatbelt surveys, and transporting supplies across the reservation. My preceptor, Tish Ramirez, explained how much of the work could be done independently.

As summer progressed we realized that the prevalence of hantavirus and other diseases was going to be low this year. I did have the opportunity to survey/document two potential hantavirus cases, which was an exciting introduction to that aspect of public health. Although I did not have the opportunity to gain a lot of experience in this field, it was comforting to know that people were not suffering which could be contributed to past public health efforts.

Since I was not spending a lot of time documenting disease outbreaks, I was able to spend my work hours completing kitchen surveys. During the summer many kitchens provide free meals for children aged 1-18 years to support a healthy diet. I was assigned 11 kitchens to inspect. I first accompanied Samantha Claw, a field sanitarian, while she was inspecting a kitchen to learn about the dynamics of the job. Then, for my first two kitchen inspections, Tish Ramirez accompanied me to provide a multitude of advice and tips. After that I was performing food and kitchen inspections independently and learning more about the Navajo Nation Food Code every day.

My favorite part of the COSTEP was the rabies clinics. During the rabies clinics we would go to one of the chapter houses on the reservation to provide free rabies vaccinations as well as free flea and tick treatment. I couldn't stay away from the rabies clinics! Not only was I able to provide a great service to the people of the Navajo Nation, but I also got to work with dogs all day! In total the Office of Environmental Health vaccinated 1,746 cats and dogs for rabies!

While in Shiprock I was also given the great opportunity to work with the World Health Organization by participating in oral rabies vaccine research. This research is focused on vaccinating large populations of dogs for rabies by inserting an oral rabies vaccine in treats, and feeding the treats to dogs. Essentially I was being paid to hand out dog treats and record if the placebo oral vaccine would have worked. Dream come true!



All of my experiences during the COSTEP were great, but something I am incredibly grateful for is how Tish Ramirez and CDR Richard Skaggs quickly realized my passion for working with animals. Upon explaining to them my growing interest in pursuing veterinary school, they put me in contact with a Dr. Scott Bender, DVM, Tribal Veterinarian. After speaking with Dr. Bender, he allowed me to assist him at his veterinary clinic on two separate occasions. This experience was invaluable as I was able to learn not only sub cutaneous shots, but also intramuscular injections. I also learned how to prepare dogs for surgery, observed many spay surgeries, learned about horse castration, helped a veterinary technician clean a large wound in the side of a horse, and much more. Having my aspirations not only listened to, but also supported in such a strong way is in my personal opinion the greatest gesture that any professional can provide. My supervisors at IHS did exactly that.

Overall, my experience as a JRCOSTEP was invaluable. Shiprock is an inspiring place to live. I made many new friends, went backpacking, rafting, hiked the Grand Canyon, joined the Diné Youth Committee, and learned to be independent. Along with this character building summer I received great work experience, but more importantly found my calling in life. Because of the support of my supervisors and co-workers, I now hope to attend veterinary school. I also have developed a passion and heart for the Navajo (Diné) and hope to return in the future to further serve through my veterinary practice. I would encourage anyone who is considering a JRCOSTEP to apply. You never know what could happen when you put yourself out there!