

**ENS Meghan Byrd  
JRCOSTEP Summer 2016  
Western Carolina University  
Lawton Service Unit  
Lawton, Oklahoma**

I first heard about the JRCOSTEP through USPHS recruiters that came to Western Carolina University and talked to the students in the Environmental Health program. As an internship is required for graduation and hearing what the recruiters said about what the Commissioned Corps had to offer, I knew that the JRCOSTEP was something I was interested in. I wanted to focus my education on public health related work; I knew this internship would help with that path. I applied for this internship and soon received a phone call from CAPT Danny Walters telling me that I would be assigned to Indian Health Service, Oklahoma Area, Lawton Service Unit for a 10-week internship. I was immediately nervous but also very excited. Little did I know this internship would turn out to be one of the greatest experiences and the best summer I could have asked for.



When I arrived in Lawton I met my preceptor, LT Dustin Joplin, as well as Katie Tompkins, Environmental Health Specialist, whom I'd be working with all summer. We immediately dove into work by conducting life safety and food service surveys for the seven tribes in Southwest Oklahoma. I was overwhelmed to say the least but with the help of LT Joplin and Ms. Tompkins, these surveys became second nature to me. I learned how to identify hazards within the facilities and how to make recommendations for corrections to help prevent sickness, injury and/or loss of life using standardized codes. The 2013 FDA Food Code and 2009 NFPA 101 Life Safety Code were primarily used for addressing violations and making recommendations for corrections. We surveyed community buildings, senior citizens' centers, childcare centers, gas stations, and even smoke shops. I experienced integrated pest management, home inspections dealing with sanitation, liquid waste disposal systems and assisted with community health events.

There were two main projects set out for me this summer, one being to teach Food Handler's Training (FHT) classes and the other being to monitor water quality and overall safety of the Comanche Nation Water Park. Teaching the FHT classes made me extremely nervous as it was not something I was familiar with at first, but after conducting several food safety surveys and reviewing the Food Code, it made things easier and improved my public speaking skills.

Things started off great at the water park. I quickly learned the importance of water quality for swimming pools and became a Certified Pool Operator in the state of Oklahoma. I would monitor chlorine and pH levels of each pool and compare my results with the facility's to make sure levels were accurate. I learned that checking the chlorine and pH levels are important because unbalanced water chemistry in pools can lead to corrosion of equipment, pumps, and can also affect the public health. Adding chlorine to the water is important to fight off certain

pathogens and prevent illness. A couple of weeks into this project, Lawton received an excessive amount of rain and severe flooding occurred completely submerging the water park (photo left). This took a toll on the park and they spent almost a month getting things back to normal which included draining all of the pools, removing debris from the park, power washing and scrubbing



the pools clean, refilling them with water, and refurbishing the offices as well as the kitchen. I continued to monitor their progress as repairs were made. The wave pool proved to be the biggest challenge in reopening the park. Several different cleaning methods and chemicals were utilized to remove recurring algae. After reopening, I continued to go twice a week, monitoring the chlorine/pH levels and overall safety of the park.

Throughout the summer, I not only got to work with an amazing group of people, but I also got to see parts of the United States that I may have not gotten to see without having this experience. I had the opportunity to travel to New Mexico and ride along route 66, experience the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, and ended up in Utah and saw the Great Salt Lake. Travelling to these different locations was well worth it; being able to see different landscapes and being able to view these sites was absolutely breathtaking.

My JRCOSTEP experience was unforgettable and definitely helped me make a decision for what I want to do after graduation. I learned so much more than I could have imagined from my mentors and truly obtained an appreciation for the education and values that it takes to be an Environmental Health Officer. The knowledge and different values that I learned throughout this experience will benefit me in my future as I plan on pursuing a career in the Commissioned Corps. Also, to anyone who asks about my experience or anyone needing internship advice, I fully recommend the JRCOSTEP. The experience will be well worth your time and you will meet people that will have an everlasting impact on you.

