

ENS Rachel Stokes
JRCOSTEP Summer 2016
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Pawnee Service Unit
Pawnee, Oklahoma



I am currently a graduate student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, pursuing a Master of Public Health in Environmental Health and Toxicology. I began searching for internships shortly after I learned that I would need one to complete my degree. I initially felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of internships available in Environmental Health, let alone the application processes required for most of them. As fate and a very successful Google search would have it, I discovered the JRCOSTEP. While the application process was daunting, I was determined and knew that this experience would be exceptional.

During my time in the U.S. Public Health Service JRCOSTEP, I worked with Indian Health Service at the Pawnee Service Unit in Pawnee, Oklahoma. The Pawnee Service Unit, Division of Environmental Health Services provides a number of services for 10 tribal nations in the north-central and northeastern sections of Oklahoma. Services range from food safety to fire safety to wastewater management and everything in between. One of my favorite aspects of the JRCOSTEP was the variety. Each day was met with versatility and variability, whether it was a new location or responsibility. The JRCOSTEP offers students an opportunity to travel to remote locations, get hands-on experience, try new things, and work with unique populations. Every JRCOSTEP experience is different, but all valuable in beginning a career in public health.

My primary activities involved food safety, water quality management, and institutional surveys. Prior to arriving in Oklahoma, I had very little experience with food safety. However, I quickly became well-versed in the 2013 FDA Food Code. As we conducted surveys of kitchens, it became easier to spot potential health hazards. I was also able to learn about and assist in writing a HACCP plan. Similar to food surveys, while conducting institutional surveys, we looked for things in buildings that could be potentially harmful to others, such as uninspected fire extinguishers or inaccessible exits. We also inspected playgrounds to insure that children could play safely with reduced risk of injury. Conducting these surveys provided valuable feedback to our communities regarding daily operational safety.



In addition to the aforementioned, I was also able to gain experience with pool surveys, car seat installation, bloodborne pathogen trainings, respirator fit testing, and community health initiatives. Few internship opportunities provide a similar wealth of knowledge and experience in such a relatively short period. My experience as a JRCOSTEP exceeded all expectations and will help me to be a better public health professional in the future.

I am so thankful to the people and organizations that made this opportunity possible including my preceptor, James Isaacs, the Pawnee Service Unit, the USPHS, and my advisor and professors in the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Public Health. This was an amazing opportunity that I will never forget!