

ENS Russell Shean
JRCOSTEP Summer 2016
University of Washington
Billings Area Office
Billings, Montana

Hi! My name is Russell Shean. I am a soon to be senior at the University of Washington in Seattle. I am majoring in Environmental Health. Last year I started looking for a job which would expose me to a wide variety of different sectors of public health. I hoped the experience would help me narrow down what exactly what I wanted to do within public health.



Helping with a bike rodeo during which kids learned about how to bike safely and received a free helmet

The job I ended up finding was with the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service's JRCOSTEP. The Commissioned Corps is unique. It is similar to the Coast Guard in that it is a non-military uniformed service formalized along military lines. What's even more unique about the Commissioned Corps is that officers generally don't work directly for the Commissioned Corps; instead they get placed in other federal agencies, primarily in the Department of Health and Human Services. For this summer I was placed with the Indian Health Service in Billings, Montana.

The Indian Health Service is the federal agency that provides healthcare and public health services to Native Americans and Alaska Natives. I worked for the Division of Environmental Health Services, Billings Area Office. Because I was assigned to the Area Office, I got to travel to several different reservations and gain exposure to many different public health activities.

About half of my time was spent doing food inspections of temporary food vendors at powwows. My coursework in school had prepared me well for understanding the science of food safety. I knew where and what conditions bacteria grow, in addition to what an endotoxin is, so I felt good about the science. What I wasn't prepared for was the politics of a food safety inspection. Inspections can be either really productive or exasperating depending upon what kind of rapport happens between the inspector and the vendor. Over the course of the summer, I learned how to best approach vendors and communicate what changes needed to be made to their operations. As the summer progressed, vendors got better and better at making changes and serving food safely and I think the difference was that I got better at tactfully telling people how to improve their food safety.

The other 50 percent of my time was spent working on injury prevention. Growing up I knew that reservations existed, but prior to taking this job I had no concept of what a reservation really was. One of the things that shocked me the most was the astronomically high rate of preventable injuries among Native Americans. Consequently, a large part of my job ended up being focused on injury prevention. Among the things I did were conduct seatbelt usage surveys, worked with a tribal epidemiology center to develop an injury prevention strategic plan, and interview Tribal Injury Prevention Specialists in order to gain new insights to the problem and explore possible interventions. Working with the tribal epidemiology center was particularly interesting because it gave me exposure to the world of non-profits and grants. The rest of my time was rounded out doing a variety of health inspections and other public health projects.

I may not pursue working for the Indian Health Service or Commissioned Corps in the future, but I am exceptionally grateful for the opportunity to gain valuable public health experience and also to learn more about Native American culture. I would like to thank my preceptor, Darcy Merchant, for always keeping me busy and being a great mentor and also Roberta Other Medicine, Environmental Health Specialist, for her willingness to share such an unflinchingly honest picture of life on the Crow Reservation.