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JRCOSTEP Summer 2017
Illinois State University
Bemidji Area Office
Bemidji, Minnesota

My name is Bethany Kozak and I am entering my senior year at Illinois State University (ISU) this fall. I plan on graduating in May of 2018 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Environmental Health. In order to graduate, the environmental health program requires a nine week externship to prepare the students for the professional field of environmental health (EH). I heard about the Indian Health Service through CAPT George Byrns, USPHS (Ret), Director, Environmental Health, ISU, in the first EH course taken as general education my freshman year. CAPT Byrns worked for IHS for nearly 30 years, and frequently referenced his time in the service in class discussions. The passion he displayed for the wide variety of EH topics he was exposed to over his USPHS career inspired me to apply for a JRCOSTEP position within Indian Health Service.



I received my call to active duty and orders to report to the Bemidji Area Office, Bemidji, Minnesota. I am from the Chicago area, and travelled 700 miles to Bemidji to start work in May. I had never been to Minnesota before, so I had no idea what to expect.

My preceptor, LCDR Timothy Taylor, Institutional Environmental Health Specialist, Bemidji Area, serves tribes in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Throughout the summer we worked closely with the Minnesota District Office, located just a few blocks away in Bemidji. Weekly meetings were conducted each Monday with staff from both offices, so we could collaborate on large projects and travel days. I got to know everyone at both offices very well, and each staff member was patient, welcoming and helped me learn new things every day. I was fortunate to have access to two offices, in turn improving on my professional communication and collaborative skills.

The IHS provided me with the opportunity to explore all facets of environmental health work. I conducted food service sanitation surveys of both permanent and temporary food establishments (i.e. powwows), mock accreditation surveys of hospitals, operational and maintenance surveys of community water systems, respirator fit testing of hospital staff, housekeeper's training at clinics, and pool surveys. I am thankful to have been exposed to the institutional EH, community health, and even some environmental engineering aspects of EH. The Bemidji Area Office team is extremely knowledgeable, and a remarkable resource for a student learning to apply formal classroom education to field work for the very first time.

In addition to daily duties, I was given the freedom to work on two summer-long projects that I am passionate about. The first was a food sovereignty initiative encouraging tribes to start local food operations for traditional foods. I did research on cottage food, meat, produce, and fishing laws in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin in collaboration with our offices in Ashland and Rhinelander, WI. The Bemidji Area will use these resources to assist tribal members becoming licensed and certified to grow and produce local foods for use within the community from Head Start lunch programs to food banks to individual sales.

The second project I worked on was implementing an Active Managerial Control program for our food service sanitation survey process. This program targets both national and Bemidji Area risk factors to food safety through CDC, FDA, and local data analysis. Instead of a traditional survey, Active Managerial Control program stresses the importance of the surveyor/manager relationship, and provides food service managers with resources to help improve policy and training specific to their establishment. New forms and supplemental materials such as sample temperature logs, self-assessments, and a certificate reward program were created to implement the program this fall.

Overall, my time with the Indian Health Service has been nothing less than a life-changing experience. Getting to work directly with tribes to assess their individual needs and provide services to their institutions was rewarding and educational. I learned so much about indigenous culture through speaking with tribal members and attending community events like powwows. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with the USPHS in Bemidji. I would recommend this externship to anyone seeking professional experience with a meaningful cause. Bemidji is so scenic, I am sure I will come back to visit. I have the IHS to thank for introducing me to Minnesota's natural beauty!

