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JRCOSTEP Summer 2017
Illinois State University
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Rhineland, Wisconsin**

My name is Maxwell Johnson and I am a student at Illinois State University (ISU). I will be continuing my senior year this fall and I plan to graduate next May with a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Health. One of the fundamental requirements of the environmental health program at ISU is to complete a nine-week externship with an approved organization. My aim from the start was to find an externship that would provide a mix of both autonomy and mentorship that would promote collaborative growth and independent function as an EH professional. Fortunately, the Director of ISU's Environmental Health program, CAPT George Byrns, USPHS (Ret), introduced me to Indian Health Service (IHS). He is a large reason why I switched from almost a decade in medicine to studying environmental health, so when he spoke passionately about the IHS and USPHS opportunities I listened intently. It was no more than a week or two later that I was already working on my application packet for the JRCOSTEP.



After a relatively short period of time I was informed I would be stationed in Rhineland, WI with the Rhineland District Office (RDO). I had never been north of Tomahawk, WI so I was very pleased to see that the beauty of the Northwoods only became more pronounced the further north I went. The RDO is within the Bemidji Area IHS that covers all tribes throughout Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin. I was fortunate enough to work under the guidance of Barry Hugo, CDR William Crump, and alongside two new hires named Jeremy Blankenship and last year's JRCOSTEP, Garret Steiner. This office mostly covers the state of Wisconsin and the Upper and Lower Peninsulas of Michigan.

I can honestly say that I developed more as an EH professional than I ever thought could be possible in such a short amount of time. I was exposed to situations in the field that, prior to the externship, I had only learned about in a controlled scholastic environment. I was also fortunate enough to work in areas of EH that I did not realize were a function of public health focused professionals. Most of my time was spent traveling around RDO's tribal regions conducting inspections of food service establishments, healthcare facilities, water treatment plants, and all other forms of buildings. I spent an extraordinary amount of time digging into the 2013 FDA Food Code, OSHA 1910 standards, and the NFPA 101 Life Safety Code. I had dealt with building and fire code in the past but had not been introduced to the 2013 Food Code, so this was a very immersive and beneficial aspect of the summer for me.



Through consistent exposure and application of these codes, I became comfortable enough to begin doing inspections autonomously. I obviously diverted any questions outside of my scope of practice to Mr. Hugo but otherwise worked independently as an EH specialist. Outside of routine inspections, I was able to help in various other ways through things like: creating plans for a code adherent commercial kitchen; providing training to food handlers; inspecting temporary food vendors; conducted respirator fit tests of medical staff; conducting tick surveillances; and many other undertakings.

In keeping with the inspection heavy aspect of my externship, I was tasked with creating a guidance document and custom inspection forms for barbershops, salons, and spas. The guidance document is meant to standardize environmental health and safety compliance in these facilities, define roles and scope of responsibilities for involved parties, and establish a framework for policy and procedure development in new facilities. This document is also versatile enough to be absorbed and customized to fit facilities outside of RDO's reach if desired.



I feel fortunate that I was not only involved in meaningful work, with experienced professionals, but that I was also working for and alongside a vast number of different cultures. The only thing more diverse than work was the collection of people surrounding me. This was extremely important to me because this diversity acted as a catalyst for my point of view; it shifted my view of EH&S from a task specific focus to a large and integrative system that is meant to improve the lives of others. This further affirmed my decision to follow this profession in a passionate manner.

My experience with the Indian Health Service was a remarkable one. I have felt welcomed, challenged, and appreciated during my time here. I am beyond thankful for the opportunity I was awarded this summer. I will absolutely be a proponent for this externship and will take everything I have learned and experienced in this time and build on it to become an EH&S professional that embodies the attributes the Commissioned Corps aims to instill in all of its officers.

