

ENS Alicia Reitz
JRCOSTEP Summer 2019
Western Carolina University
Reno District Office
Reno, Nevada



I am a senior at Western Carolina University in North Carolina and will be graduating in December 2019 with a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Health. After graduation I look forward to pursuing a career with the Indian Health Service (IHS) and beginning the Commissioned Corps boarding process. My initial interest in the Commissioned Corps and IHS stem from my father's experience as a COSTEP himself and his career as a Commissioned Corps Engineer for IHS. For my JRCOSTEP I was stationed at the IHS, Division of Environmental Health Services, Reno District Office in Reno, NV. This office serves over thirty tribes in Utah, Nevada, and Owen's Valley of California. LCDR Landon Wiggins was my preceptor, though I did a considerable amount of field work with other officers as well.

While stationed in Reno, I had the opportunity to assist with a variety of community-based environmental health services, namely food service surveys. I also was able to conduct mosquito surveillance, a pool survey, comprehensive environmental health surveys, temporary food vendor training, and seat belt usage surveys.

The majority of my fieldwork consisted of food surveys, as they are generally scheduled for summertime at the Reno District Office. Throughout the summer I learned how to conduct a survey and what to look for and ask operators, expanding on what I have been learning through my studies. Even more importantly, I had a first-hand look at the consultative relationship between IHS and the tribes we serve. With each community and event having its own unique set of challenges I was able to witness the public health approach from a number of environmental health specialists, which gave me a diverse exposure to perspectives on this government to government relationship.



The last week of June, I was fortunate enough to travel to the U & O Service Unit in Ft. Duchesne, UT to assist the environmental health specialist stationed there conduct surveys of temporary food vendors at the Ute 4th of July Powwow. Before the event, I was able to help my coworkers teach a temporary food vendor training, covering the most basic aspects of food safety and special requirements for temporary food vendors. We walked through some hands-on activities as well, such as testing sanitizer solution, calibrating thermometers, and storage of raw and ready-to-eat foods for cold holding. We conducted pre-operational and operational food service surveys of 18 food vendors at the Powwow. I was able to conduct several surveys on my own and follow-up with the same vendors the following day. It was exciting to see significant improvements over the three days. Furthermore, the overall

Powwow experience to include viewing the opening ceremony, dance competitions, traditional dress, and drumming—was a valuable experience.

Throughout the summer I also had the opportunity to work in the field doing mosquito surveillance. We set EVS traps throughout the community of Schurz, NV, where positive cases of West Nile virus have occurred in the past. The first collection in June yielded few mosquitos, all of which tested negative. The results for the second collection have not yet been received. I also assisted with a swimming pool survey, the only one in the Reno District. Here, I was able to use my skills and knowledge of recreational water quality to evaluate the safe operation and maintenance of the public swimming pool.

My summer project looked at the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing deficiencies related to employee health and personal hygiene. I focused on 11 Head Start and childcare facilities in the Reno District that are a part of the nation-wide 2016-2020 program performance measures. Another component of my project was to distribute the Reno District Office SOP Compendium to all target facilities. This compendium is a compilation of 28 SOPs including thermometer calibration, dishwashing procedures, handwashing, and trace-back procedures. The goal is that target facilities will adopt and customize SOPs to fit their individual operational needs. I found an overall decrease in deficiencies in employee health and personal hygiene, the most common being hand hygiene-related. There were also significant inconsistencies in surveyor standardization regarding scheduling, documenting, and reporting. Moving forward, surveyor standardization must be addressed to ensure surveys are conducted, documented and reported consistently to improve quality and credibility.

Over the course of the summer, I had endless opportunities to work in the field with all the environmental health services staff in the Reno District, allowing me to observe a wide variety of approaches to concerns regarding environmental health. I appreciate that IHS serves as a consultant rather than a regulatory authority, though this also poses a challenge in and of itself. I spent much of the summer enjoying the fieldwork, though had a good taste of the administrative work required to follow-up on surveys. I learned about the relationship between IHS and the tribes we serve through first-hand experiences with tribal operations, as well as expanded on technical knowledge and skills to complement my studies. I did not go a day during my JRCOSTEP without experiencing unfamiliar or challenging situations, which helped me grow professionally and personally. The combination of the experiences gained and the people I have been working with created an unforgettable summer. I am thankful to have had such a wonderful opportunity as a JRCOSTEP and highly recommend it to other students.

