

ENS Natalie Peterson
JRCOSTEP Summer 2020
University of Washington
Great Plains Area Office
Aberdeen, South Dakota

My name is Natalie Peterson and I am a senior at the University of Washington, completing my Bachelor of Science in Environmental and Occupational Health. I learned about JRCOSTEP from an upper classman who had done it the previous summer and I was instantly interested in applying. The opportunity to gain a wide variety of hands-on field experiences, combined with the chance to live and explore a new area was very appealing. When I left home and drove 1,300 miles to my duty station at the Indian Health Service, Great Plains Area, Division of Environmental Health Services, in Aberdeen, SD I had no idea what to expect for the internship, especially among all the uncertainty in the world due to COVID-19.



Exploring Badlands National Park, SD

As with most things, COVID-19 changed some of the preplanned projects for my time as a JRCOSTEP. With so many facilities closed and events canceled, a lot of the routine environmental health tasks shifted to take on challenges related to COVID-19. We provided reopening guidance to ensure the safety of staff and customers. I was able to work at a mass testing event for a community, where I helped prepare test kits and collect preliminary demographic information from the patients. As the use and demand for PPE increased due to the pandemic, I assisted in compiling data related to the PPE burn rates at several hospitals in the area, and attended a webinar about using elastomeric half mask respirators as an alternative to N-95s. Helping with the COVID-19 crisis in any way I could was a humbling experience.



In full PPE at a COVID-19 mass testing event

I was also able to perform more routine environmental health work. After a mass testing event I drove to North Dakota for the week to accompany LT Foerg on survey work. There was a school reopening meeting that I attended with various community members to help weigh the risks and precautions for reopening. We conducted food surveys of a deli, meat market and grocery store, in addition to an environmental health and safety survey of a community building. During these surveys I learned what things to look for and how to best communicate with staff. After the survey I learned how to write reports using the Web-based Environmental Health Reporting System, the online reporting system. When writing these reports I learned how to use and cite the



Leading a food survey of a facility's kitchen

2017 FDA Food Code. Understanding how to use the NFPA 101 Life Safety Code was difficult at first, but once I learned the how it was organized it was easier to cite and communicate in the reports. I was able to learn how to explain the codes in a way that was easier to understand, while still effectively communicating the risks and providing recommendations. Later on in the summer I was able to lead surveys at a youth treatment facility's kitchen, a gas station and an elder nutrition program, and write the reports. There were other days in the field with CDR Honeycutt where we delivered rabies virus vaccines to different communities. In the office I took FEMA emergency management classes, basic readiness courses, and learned new skills that I was able to apply in the field.

A large portion of my special projects were with Mr. Wildcat, Injury Prevention Specialist. I specifically focused on seat belt usage on reservations in the Great Plains Area. In

order to collect data, observational seat belt surveys were performed, which consist of counting the number of passengers and drivers wearing seat belts at certain locations during different time periods. While with LT Foerg, we dedicated a day to observational seat belt surveys. This data is then compiled into annual summaries, which are used to provide recommendations for laws, enforcement and education regarding seat belt usage. I used the data to create infographics, a community specific report, and update the annual summary. In addition to seat belt usage, I also created a report on injury prevention strategies for a specific community.

My final project for the summer was to develop a hazard communication plan for a Youth Regional Treatment Center. The first part of this consisted of finding, compiling and alphabetizing Safety Data Sheets for 59 chemicals. The next part was to create the actual hazard communication plan, in accordance with OSHA requirements.

The experiences and knowledge I gained during my time as a JRCOSTEP were beyond any expectations I had. I'm extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to learn more and be able to practice environmental health in person amidst a pandemic. During my time here I developed as a professional, but also grew as a person. My verbal and written communication skills strengthened, I learned new technical skills, and experienced a wide variety in the field of environmental health. The hands-on experiences I had reassured me that environmental health is not only something that I am passionate about studying, but also something I enjoy doing in practice. I want to give the biggest thank you imaginable to CDR Honeycutt, Mr. Wildcat, and LT Foerg for their help this summer, and for sharing their wisdom with me. To anyone considering JRCOSTEP as their externship, I would highly recommend it. It was the most unique hands-on and knowledge gaining experiences that an environmental health student could ask for.