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My name is Alex Sjoboen, and I am an undergraduate student at the University of Washington. I will be graduating this fall with a Bachelor's of Science in Environmental and Occupational Health. This summer I worked for the Indian Health Service, Portland Area, Division of Environmental Health Services under the mentorship of my preceptor CDR Christopher Fish. I experienced first-hand the many hats an Environmental Health Specialist wears.



Checking airflow at the Colville Dental Clinic

With offices closed due to COVID-19, my apartment in Seattle became my remote office, and I drove or flew to the tribal communities that the Portland Area Office serves in Oregon, Idaho, and Washington. Throughout the summer, I visited the Colville, Wellpinit, Yakama, Western Oregon, and Fort Hall Service Units and the surrounding tribal communities.

While onboarding remotely for a new job proved to have its challenges, I was out in the field on the Yakama Nation by my second week on the job, learning the ins and outs of food safety. I shadowed and assisted LT Josh Liles, Environmental Health Specialist, with almost 20 surveys of food service establishments, childcare centers, grocery stores, and correctional facilities. I learned how to use their Web-based Environmental Health Reporting System (WebEHRS), to write reports and recommendations of the survey findings. I frequently used the 2017 FDA Food Code to base my recommendations on, which I became more familiar with throughout the summer and helped me improve how I effectively communicate the importance of food safety.

Another aspect of my internship was traveling with CDR Fish to the different healthcare facilities where we met a variety of people and specialties. Every trip introduced me to a new part of the job. I got to work on a range of projects throughout the summer, including air quality monitoring, infection control, and ventilation.

While at the Yakama Service Unit, I had the opportunity to attend an infection control meeting where pharmacists, dentists, nurses and other healthcare and facility employees worked together to assign a level of risk to different policies and procedures using a risk matrix table. The experience highlighted for me the different perspectives that people bring with their specific training and expertise and the importance of working in teams to get the best result. After shadowing an infection control round the next day, I created a checklist using the app iAuditor that allows users conducting the rounds to easily record findings in a report during the survey, with the option to upload pictures right into the report.

One of the highlights of my internship was traveling to the Colville Service Unit where I assisted in assessing the airflow in patient areas of the dental clinic. CDR Fish taught me how to calculate the air changes per hour of a room with the dimensions we measured. In addition, I learned how to use that information to recommend how long clinicians should wait between patients when conducting aerosol-generating procedures to keep staff safe from potential COVID-19 exposures.

I am incredibly grateful for the mentorship from CDR Fish and the opportunity to learn from and participate with knowledgeable professionals about how to consult with tribes to provide the best possible services and care to tribal community members. It was very special and insightful listening and speaking with the owners and employees of the tribal establishments and clinics. I am appreciative of the support, help, and patience of everyone who helped me make the most of a hybrid work setting, and thrilled that my first job in the field was hands-on with tasks ranging from industrial hygiene to food safety. I highly recommend this internship to anyone looking to take their education and skill sets out of the classroom and to the next level by getting involved in a variety of projects and who have questions about what it means to work in public health.



Coulee Dam on the way to the Colville Service Unit