

ENS Rachel Scroggins
JRCOSTEP Summer 2021
Johns Hopkins University
Albuquerque Area Office
Albuquerque, New Mexico



My name is Rachel Scroggins and I am a current graduate student at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I am entering my second year of the program in Fall 2021 with plans to graduate with a Master of Science in Environmental Health in May 2022. My pathway to the Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training Externship Program (JRCOSTEP) began in my previous career. After obtaining my undergraduate degree in chemical engineering, I worked for an environmental consulting company and provided support to the Health and Safety Branch at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences alongside colleagues in the U.S. Public Health Service. I became eager to learn more about pursuing the Commissioned Corps as a career.



LCDR Frank and ENS Scroggins

After learning about the JRCOSTEP on the USPHS website, I knew immediately this was my opportunity to get involved while also pursuing graduate school. I jumped into the application process and was excited when I received a phone call from CAPT Carrie Oyster and LCDR Sam Frank notifying me that my duty station was going to be in Albuquerque, NM with the Indian Health Service, Office of Environmental Health and Engineering, Division of Environmental Health Services. The Albuquerque Area IHS serves over 27 tribal groups throughout New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, and Utah. Unique to my experience, I was fortunate to work with field staff across four different Service

Units in New Mexico and Colorado. I also had the opportunity to wear the USPHS uniform, which I felt greatly enhanced my COSTEP as it allowed me to obtain the full experience as an Environmental Health Officer (EHO).

I took on a variety of tasks and duties under the direction of my Preceptor, LCDR Sam Frank, and LT Braden Hickey. I also worked with a team of extremely welcoming and talented staff including: CAPT Carrie Oyster (DEHS Director), Ann Buchanan (Field Sanitarian), Kristin Kaydahzinne (Field Sanitarian), and Jay Wyatt (Field Sanitarian).

My work as a JRCOSTEP quickly took off after arriving in Albuquerque. After receiving a crash course in PHS customs and courtesies from CAPT Oyster and LCDR Frank, I began my journey with LT Hickey and traveled to Ramah, NM to conduct annual rabies vaccination clinics. In the span of three days, approximately 300 household pets were vaccinated!



Measuring slide heights during a playground inspection

I quickly learned that an EHO wears many hats on an average day. I participated in a variety of community visits. I helped to investigate a public health nuisance of a horse living closely to a community member's home, and I performed a healthy homes assessment for falls prevention in order to aid an elder in getting a ramp and other ADA compliant equipment purchased for her home. I conducted a variety of surveys and inspections including: wellness centers, playgrounds, recreation centers, food booths at the Mescalero Apache Feast Day celebration, a library, a school kitchen, a child care

center, a food distribution center, a detention center, and a hotel. I presented on playground safety with LT Hickey at the Head Start Training Summit where we had over 126 attendees. I also helped to execute the quarterly fire drill at the Taos-Picuris Indian Health Center, performed the fire extinguisher inspections at the clinic, and helped to conduct the Environment of Care rounds for the clinic pharmacy to ensure safety protocols were being maintained.

One of the highlights of my summer was the chance I had to explore new areas of public health and further develop my educational interests. While in Durango, CO, I had the opportunity to dive more into the topic of food safety. I helped teach a Food Handlers Training to kitchen staff at a local casino, where I presented on techniques of proper hygienic practices. I also performed a mock standardization exercise in the casino kitchen during the dinner rush to test my ability in identifying food safety hazards based on the 2017 FDA Food Code. These activities led into creating a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) plan for the casino kitchen, which was providing meals to a new Head Start opening in the community. A HACCP requires analyzing the entire process of making the food product (accomplished via a flow diagram) in order to determine the critical control points where limits can be established to take corrective action in the event of a certain parameter, like temperature, is out of an acceptable range. Learning the principles of HACCP really captured my interest and provided insight on how process engineering also has direct applications in food safety.



Taking temperatures during a food inspection

My summer did not stop at the amazing people and engaging projects I worked on while visiting each Service Unit. I had the chance to explore areas of New Mexico that truly were breathtaking. These experiences included camping in the mountains of Eagle Nest, NM, watching the sunset and fireworks on the Fourth of July over the Rio Grande Gorge, climbing in ancient cave dwellings in Los Alamos, NM, and taking the "long way down" a trail 10,000 feet above sea level in Gallup, NM.

My opportunity to experience the diverse and multifaceted roles of an EHO during my COSTEP has been an unforgettable experience of which I am truly grateful. I learned so much during my summer with the IHS, and I intend on commissioning as an EHO upon completion of my graduate degree in the very near future. Thank you to everyone who made this experience possible!