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Intern Summer 2021
Illinois State University
Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC)
Sitka, Alaska



My name is Xavier Braboy and I am currently entering my fifth year of my undergraduate education at Illinois State University studying Environmental Health and Sustainability. A requirement of this degree is to complete a nine-week internship gaining experience as an environmental health professional. I was offered a position as a Safety and Environmental Health intern for the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC) in Sitka, AK on the campus of Mt. Edgecumbe Medical Center serving the tribes of the southeast region.

When I initially was applying for internships to fulfill this requirement, I was interested in multiple opportunities working with the Indian Health Service, and when I found information on the SEARHC internship, it seemed like it would be the perfect place for me, and before I knew it, I set off for Sitka and began working in the safety department.

In early June, Andrew Atkinson, my supervisor, and Shannon Freitas Director of Safety, compiled a basic list of tasks and assignments I was to work on over the next nine weeks. If more opportunities were to occur, I was encouraged to be flexible and willing for new experiences and I took this in stride. To name a few tasks, they would include environmental tours of villages and their facilities, building inspections of SEARHC's clinics, employee respirator fit testing, conducting inventories of chemicals, and preparing for a mass casualty drill to take place at the medical center after my internship was completed.

The most interesting experience was traveling to various facility locations throughout southeast Alaska. These included Juneau, Petersburg, Klawock, Hydaburg, and Kasaan. In Klawock and Hydaburg, Mr. Atkinson and I conducted pre-inspections of their community landfills that were classified as Type III, the smallest type that are only found in Alaska. After meeting with the landfill operators, we completed a digital inspection and reported it to them so they could make improvements prior to the time state health inspectors would come to critique their methods and procedures on how a landfill is ran. We also met with village leaders and informed them of the resources SEARHC would provide for their city workers, specifically wastewater management, water management, and landfill workers.

In Juneau and Petersburg, Mr. Atkinson and I met with SEARHC staff to conduct facility inspections of offsite clinics to ensure employee and customer safety. We spent some time researching and observing the regulated medical waste disposal methods that take place on sight. I would use the information I gained from this experience to create a report on regulated medical waste and how SEARHC has worked to reduce the amount of RMW that is sent to landfill. A research project was required to complete my internship through Illinois State University.

Before my externship was completed, COVID-19 was becoming rampant in Sitka, and there was med-surge at the medical center in town. Ms. Freitas reached out to me with an opportunity that I will probably never see again after entering the environmental health field – would I like to work in the emergency room for one night as a lab runner? This would consist of sanitizing medical beds, running lab samples, and being of general assistance to the ER staff. Though this was something I never saw myself doing, I took her up on her offer to be of assistance to the company that had employed me for nine weeks. I will likely never step foot into an ER room as a healthcare worker again, but I am grateful to have had this experience, and to be exposed to what healthcare workers deal with and have experienced for over a year due to the pandemic.

My nine weeks with SEARHC flew by faster than I had wished, but the knowledge I gained from my supervisor and other colleagues is what I am most grateful for. I hope to carry these experiences with me as I continue my education and enter the career field of environmental health.

