

Fiona Richards
Extern Summer 2023
State University of New York
Rhineland District Office
Rhineland, Wisconsin

My name is Fiona Richards, and I'm from Brooklyn, NY. I am going into my junior year at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF) in August 2023. I have an expected graduation date of May 2025 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Health. Due to my academic program being accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council, I need to complete a minimum of 180 hours of internship/professional experience within the environmental health field. I learned of this externship with the Indian Health Service (IHS) through LTJG Katherine Miller, a former JRCOSTEP and alum of SUNY ESF.



Fiona Richards and Ryan Wheeler, EH Specialist at a maple syrup processing plant

I was selected by the IHS to do a 10-week externship at the Rhineland District Office (RDO) in Rhineland, WI, which is part of the Bemidji Area IHS. After accepting the position, I packed a duffel bag and a small tote bag and flew from New York to Rhineland. Once I got to Rhineland, I met my preceptor, Barry Hugo, as well as the other friendly faces at RDO.



Testing the concentration of the sanitizing solution

During my time in Rhineland, I got to travel to various tribes in WI and MI with Barry Hugo, Ryan Wheeler, and William Bloomfield. I worked with nine different tribes: Lac du Flambeau (LDF), Sokaogon Chippewa, Forest County Potawatomi (FCP), Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO), Bad River, Stockbridge-Munsee, Hannahville Indian Community, Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, and Lac Vieux Desert (LVD). While visiting these tribes, I mostly helped with food safety inspections and writing the reports in the Web-based Environmental Health Reporting System (WebEHRS). Writing these reports allowed me to become more acquainted with the 2022 FDA Food Code and allowed me to apply food safety concepts learned in my food safety course. I also went with Ryan Wheeler to inspect food vendors at the Hannahville Indian Community's powwow and the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community's powwow.

Exposure to multiple areas that environmental health specialists are involved with was one of the things I loved about being at RDO. In addition to food safety inspections, I had the opportunity to conduct a variety of other inspections, including but not limited to: pool inspections, a casino hotel inspection, childcare center inspections, head start inspections, a playground inspection, and a campground inspection. One of the highlights of my experience was helping Ryan conduct respirator fit testing of employees from a clinic and elder center. I interacted with several people, walking them through different exercises to see which respirator fit/protected them the best. If they “failed” the fit test with all of the different available respirators, or had a medical exemption from wearing one, the tribe also offered them to use a Powered Air Purifying Respirator (PAPR). Proper donning/doffing and care and maintenance of the PAPR was then demonstrated to them and then they were observed while practicing these techniques.



Preparing to conduct respirator fit testing with employees from the clinic and elder center

For my project for the summer, I created reference sheets to help employees when completing reports in WebEHRS, specifically for childcare and head start inspections. When working on childcare reports, employees currently have to go through the sections in WebEHRS individually to determine which codes are associated with each violation. For head start reports, only a handful of sections note what violation codes can be used. The childcare reference sheet lists codes from the 4th edition of Caring for Our Children (CFOC) that are listed under each violation section in WebEHRS. The head start reference sheet also has codes from Head Start Performance Standards (HSPS). These reference sheets can help increase the speed at which employees take to complete reports. Additionally, they can make it easier for new employees to learn the ropes for these types of inspections.

My extern experience with the Indian Health Service assured me that my decision to major in environmental health was the right one, and it also gave me the chance to travel. I’d never been to Wisconsin or Michigan before my externship, so it was nice to be able to see new places and help communities that I wouldn’t have been able to otherwise. I would definitely recommend this opportunity to students interested in environmental health due to the amount of hands-on work available to you and the great people you can meet. This experience helped me get my foot in the door within the environmental health field, and I’m excited to explore the new doors this will open for me. Thank you to those I worked with from the Rhinelander District Office and the Bemidji Area as a whole for giving me this opportunity and making my time in Rhinelander a memorable one.