

ENS Averil Sills
JRCOSTEP Summer 2025
Reno District Office
Reno, Nevada

My name is Averil Sills and I attend East Tennessee State University (ETSU). Pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety, my advisor recommended the Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (JRCOSTEP). The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) provides a unique opportunity to students in this field to experience field and office work first-hand. Although I've never been to Nevada, I knew this externship would give me invaluable insight into my future career. Graduating December 2025, this will be my last externship before leaving ETSU.



I was stationed in Reno, NV, with the Indian Health Service (IHS), Phoenix Area, Division of Environmental Health Service, Reno District Office (RDO). During my time in Nevada, I was also able to visit the IHS field offices in Fort Duchesne, UT and Elko, NV. Being in Nevada was a big difference compared to the landscape in Northeast Tennessee. This summer I was able to help serve many communities in Nevada and Utah including various parts of the Ute, Paiute, and Shoshone Tribes.

My preceptor during this summer was LCDR Francis Park, District Environmental Health Officer. Under his supervision, I was able to learn how to conduct and write food service sanitation surveys. After obtaining my ServSafe Food Protection Manager Certification, I was able to assist my coworkers in teaching the course in Bishop, CA (Paiute-Shoshone) and Fort Duchesne, UT. In terms of special events, I was able to attend two powwows in Utah and help with a week-long rabies vaccination clinic in Nevada. I was also able to join the engineers in the office on occasion to visit various sites, including a drinking water plant, solid waste transfer station, and other construction sites in tribal communities.



I was able to assist at the Reno District Office, Elko Field Office, and the Uintah-Ouray (U&O) Field Office. These three offices all have greatly varying experiences to offer, as working with the local community differs between regions. I assisted Environmental Health Specialists (EHS) Saba Wube and Ronald Gerace in Reno, LTJG Andrae Genus in Elko, and EHS Eric Freitas in U&O. While we mainly conducted food inspections, I was able to experience many states for the first time. Most of the work conducted was either in Nevada or Utah, but the range of Reno District also borders California (Bishop), Idaho (Duck Valley), and Oregon (Fort McDermitt).

My special project for this summer was writing an internal guide for the Phoenix Area environmental health staff to participate as an ambassador of the IHS Asthma Control in Tribal Communities (ACT) initiative. When beginning research, there seemed to be a lack of information on the program. A majority of pilot sites listed online are conducted by IHS clinical staff, leaving a gap for environmental health officers' involvement. I created a document that will hopefully streamline EHO involvement as I created sample forms, linked important resources, and emphasized how important all sectors of IHS would be in the implementation of a long-term goal like many of these projects require.

Overall, this externship offered many experiences both independently and in a team. I was able to experience many Native American traditions for the first time. This position is very unique, providing an experience I'm not sure any other job could offer. The work I was able to do as an extern will make a tangible impact on the tribal communities served. I'm glad my advisor recommended this opportunity and I will definitely do the same for those in my program at ETSU.