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Jr. COSTEP Summer 2008
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Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation
Dillingham, Alaska

There are several roles that the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation Environmental Health Office is responsible for that I was able to take part in during my tenure. The overall COSTEP experience took place in Dillingham as well as in some of the villages in which I traveled for field work. I was responsible for writing reports and taking compliance surveys for duties such as: solid-waste surveys, waste-water surveys, health clinic surveys, rabies lay vaccinations, drinking water quality analysis, HAZ-MAT drill, and Consumer Confidence Reports. Furthermore, I was charged the task of creating a standardized method of surveying and reporting on the compliance status of village health clinics. This reporting tool will potentially be used as the standardized method for surveying and reporting of village health clinics throughout the entire state of Alaska. This new format is designed to semi-automate the writing of the report based on responses given in the “check-sheet” portion of database. The entire survey tool was created using Excel and has thus far proven to be convenient and time saving.

I am currently a senior at New Mexico State University majoring in both Biology and Environmental Science with an emphasis in Environmental Health & Safety. NMSU is located in Las Cruces, NM which happens to be where I was born. I am scheduled to graduate in December 2008 and hope to continue my education within the next year by pursuing a master’s degree in Industrial Hygiene.

When I first heard about summer opportunities through the COSTEP program, I saw it just as a way to fulfill my internship requirement in order for my Environmental Health degree to be accredited. I was forwarded a recruitment letter from one of my professors about the COSTEP program specifically for Alaska. I decided to embark on the seemingly endless task of filling out application paperwork in hopes of a summer spent in beautiful scenery, comfortable weather, and the great outdoors instead of baking in the deserts of New Mexico for another summer. Once I received word that I was accepted and found out where I was going, the nerves started reeling. I tried my best not to have any big expectations (the old saying “if you don’t have any expectations, you won’t ever be let down), but they soon started to mount.

As I began to speak regularly with some of the staff from the office that I was to be working with, I started to get an image of what everything would be like once I arrived. After a day of flying and another day in Anchorage for orientation, I finally arrived in Dillingham where I was met at the gate by the two Environmental Health Specialists that I was to be working side-by-side with. On the short drive to the place I was going to stay for the summer, I saw some of the greatest scenery I think I had ever seen. About the

time I got all unpacked and went for a tour around the town, the office, and the surrounding area, I knew this summer was going to be the experience of a lifetime.

My COSTEP was through the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation located in Dillingham, Alaska. Dillingham is located in the southwest portion of the state where the Nushagak River & Wood River converge and is home to roughly 2,400 people. The Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation encompasses an area the size of the state of Ohio and is responsible for 34 villages/communities. Travel to the villages is a very unique experience; all travel in and out of villages is by small, usually single engine, bush planes. Travel within the villages is also unique, most natives use ATV, skiff, or snowmobile as their main source of transportation. It was also very interesting to see how much the villages and their residents depend on the native wildlife for survival.

The COSTEP experience I attained while in Dillingham consisted of a wide variety of environmental health concerns, many that I had seen before through course work, and several that were new and specific to the area. Throughout the course of the program I was able to aid in conducting surveys for waste-water, solid waste, health clinics, and sanitation. These surveys are taken on site in the villages and a full compliance evaluation is written for each to better serve the health needs of the villages. I have received training and/or certification in Rabies Lay Vaccination, Drinking Water Microbiological Laboratory, First Aid, and Basic Life Support. The first few weeks of my stay I got to write almost all of the Consumer Confidence Reports for the areas villages, these reports detail the quality of the drinking water in each community. I also got to take part in a HAZ-MAT drill and in several investigations concerning animal bites to ensure that the victims had not contracted rabies from the wound(s). I was charged with creating a new standardized system for conducting clinic surveys and writing the reports that accompany them. This new system is designed to speed up the time it takes to conduct a survey and compile the report.

Participating in the COSTEP has been more beneficial than I had ever thought it would have been when I started the application process. I have put to use many of the skills I have learned while in school as well as developing a few more. I had the privilege of getting to experience new surroundings, new people, and a variety of different cultures while in a picturesque setting. The networking, knowledge, and experience I have obtained during my brief tenure are already paying dividends on my future and education. I can't say enough about the people that I have worked with or the communities in which I have stayed. I would recommend the COSTEP to anyone who wants to meet new people, see new places, further their knowledge & education, and get a little taste of what the Environmental Health field has to offer.