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I have had an amazing experience as a JRCOSTEP with the Indian Health Service. I first learned about the US Public Health Service from my professors but I never really knew a lot about the Commissioned Corps Officer Student Training & Extern Program (COSTEP) until I attended a presentation one evening given by Kit Grosch from the IHS Nashville Area Office. I knew that a COSTEP was exactly how I wanted to spend my summer. I am currently attending East Tennessee State University majoring in Environmental Health with a minor in Biology. Since an internship is required in our Environmental Health department, I decided I wanted to make an adventure out of it instead of settling for something close to home. I made my way through all of the paperwork—which is a lot, but it is absolutely worth it. When I got the call from my preceptor, LCDR Celeste Davis, in Portland, Oregon, I could not wait to get started! On May 17, I began my journey—Goodbye Tennessee, Hello Oregon! As I flew in to the Portland International Airport, looking out the airplane window at the spectacular view—Mount St. Helens, Mount Hood, and Mount Rainer, etc.—I knew this would be an unforgettable experience. I was pleased to call Portland my new home for the summer.



My duty station was the Portland Area Office in downtown Portland. In order to get the whole, well rounded, environmental health experience, I have been assigned a wide variety of tasks throughout the summer. One task was to design several training modules on topics including fire safety for homes, fire safety for the workplace, safe food handling, blood borne pathogens, and miscellaneous safety topics including playground safety, safe boating, child restraint systems in motor vehicles, etc. Also, I created a climate change presentation addressing the issues related to climate change from ecosystem disruption to public health concerns. I also worked on compiling asthma, injury, and food borne illness data to identify trends in such ailments to compare with national data from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I also collected data pertaining to traffic related fatalities involving American Indians and Alaska Natives to determine percentages of seatbelt use and alcohol involvement in the total number of fatalities. I was given the opportunity to work with the Northwest Area Indian Health Board on several occasions—injury prevention meetings, viewing and analyzing an Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Public Health Assessment pertaining to uranium mine superfund site for a health study.

In addition to my time spent working in the ever-exciting PAO, I was able to venture outside of the office. Celeste and I traveled to an Inter-Agency meeting in Seattle on solid waste with the Makah Tribe. Here we were joined by the tribe, Environmental Protection Agency, US

Department of Agriculture-Rural Development, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Army Corps of Engineers to hear the concerns of the tribe concerning an open dump, potential waste management strategies, and proposed facilities. It was interesting to hear their concerns as well as the agencies in attendance address their ideas and discuss ways they can and cannot help the tribe. Also, I was given the opportunity to attend Group Facilitation Methods training with several other IHS employees. At this two day training, we learned the fundamentals of facilitating effective meetings and brainstorming sessions for any topic and then reaching a conclusion. As I am approaching my career, I understand that being able to facilitate efficient meetings is a valuable skill to have and I was able to practice in a safe environment and learn some great techniques. I even conducted an annual blood borne pathogen training for the staff at a healthcare clinic in the area!

Furthermore, I have accompanied Celeste on several surveys of restaurants, a casino, food commodity distribution center, RV park, pump house, healthcare clinic, and community gathering building. Also, I tagged along on part of a pool survey for an indoor water park with Karin Knopp and COSTEP, Nikki Trautman, both from the Olympic District Office in Bremerton, WA. I got plenty of practice preparing reports from the surveys we conducted and entering them into the online database, WEBEHS.

Another project I participated in was locating Columbia River Treaty Fishing Access Sites also known as “in lieu sites” along the Columbia River along both the Washington and Oregon banks. The sites are for the exclusive use of tribal members of Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Nez Perce tribes to conduct their customary fishing activities. Some of



these sites are inhabited year-round while others are only inhabited during certain parts of the year depending on which fish are running the river. Campsites range from permanent structures and RVs to makeshift shelters of plywood and tarpaulins. Fishermen catch fish from boats and from scaffolds constructed on the banks of the river. The fish are then brought in and immediately cleaned. Most sites are equipped with a cleaning table and running water. Some fish are sold fresh—others are smoked or dried using traditional practices.

Undeniably, my choice to apply for a COSTEP has been the best one I have made in my career yet. I have gained a unique work experience, plus travel and pay! I have learned more about environmental health from a completely different standpoint than anything I would experience inside the classroom. In addition to the internship, moving to

Portland has enabled me to grow considerably as an individual. While I was not working, there were plenty of adventures to be had in and around Portland—hiking in the Columbia River Gorge, exploring Mt. St. Helens, and relaxing on the coast are just a few things I loved about the area. I have seen some of the most beautiful parts of the country and met some great people who enjoy what they do and the services they provide. I feel that I have significantly grown professionally while doing things I enjoy. Given the opportunity, I would certainly not hesitate to do it all over again. 😊