

**ENS Ryan Autenrieth**  
**JrCOSTEP, Summer 2010**  
**Colorado State University**  
**Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium**  
**Anchorage, Alaska**



I have had the privileged opportunity to work for the U.S. Public Health Service and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) in Anchorage, Alaska as part of my Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (JrCOSTEP) for the summer of 2010. I flew into Alaska on May, 16th and I can honestly say that time flies when you're in Alaska for the summer! I had never been to Alaska before this trip and I knew absolutely no one here before I came. Now I know Anchorage and its surrounding areas along with a couple of Native Villages that I have visited. I have made a close knit group of friends and I do something new outside every weekend! Alaska is amazing, I have been: mountain climbing, water rafting, boat drifting, glacier hiking, halibut fishing and camping to just name a few activities.

My internship is unique because I work for four different departments with four different supervisors, so depending on the day and time I may be doing something very different. I work for ANTHC's Department of Environmental Health and Engineering (DEHE) and we work on the cutting edge of Public/Environmental Health Research in regards to Alaskan Natives. For example, our department is in the middle of a large prospective health study that was created to measure the health effects that running water and indoor plumbing has on Alaskan Natives. Baseline information was collected and all of the villages in the study recently received running water and indoor plumbing (our departmental engineering and construction counterparts helped build these structures), and the preliminary results suggest that this may be having a positive health impact on the Alaska Natives.



We also look into the factors that encourage or discourage water and soap use because these communities have had to conserve the water that they traditionally haul from miles away or collect from rain. Opposed to what most Americans are taught about conserving water, we are educating these villages to use more because we want them to wash their hands, to take baths and to not recycle dirty water. I have the unique opportunity to see these seldom visited villages and work with some of the best Environmental Health Officers of our time to conduct this life-changing research.

I have already had the opportunity to travel to a couple of other villages to disseminate preliminary study information and to administer an air quality questionnaire. This was a great cultural opportunity because I got to be part of a Tribal Elder meeting and I had an extensive conversation with the Mayor in one of the communities. In addition, a co-worker taught me a few words of Yup'ik, which is one of the many Alaska Native languages, so I was able to practice my words with the Elders. They understood me, but teased me for my accent! My wonderful supervisor, LT Jennifer Dobson, also let me help teach the Community Health Aides (who serve as health providers in rural communities), about Rabies prevention, risk factors, prophylaxis and wound disinfection.

I also work for the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) where I work on safety, health and emergency preparedness training. I spent a lot of my time working on needle-stick prevention & chemical safety with the employees at ANMC. I had the opportunity to be an evaluator of a Disaster Drill at Elmendorf Air Force Base

too. I learned first hand about their Incident Command System while I helped evaluate their triage station. I have had the opportunity to visit the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) Quarantine Center at the airport and I suited up in their isolation room. I attended the HAZ/MAT for healthcare training and assisted with a full scale decontamination exercise at the hospital. I worked with Southcentral Foundation (SCF) to help with hazard surveillance, regulated medical waste and security procedures on their medical campus. On top of the many other exciting assignments, I was also trained in suicide prevention and interventions (Alaska Natives have the highest rate of suicide in the United States) and I was able to develop and implement the first ever Alaska specific program evaluation of this training while working under a State Epidemiologist.



The U.S. Public Health Service offers a rare opportunity of a lifetime where you will get to work on enhancing and promoting public health across the United States and the world. ANTHC offers a great opportunity for new Environmental Health Officers to learn from the best while helping to make Alaska Natives the healthiest people in the world in a uniquely challenging environment. The rugged and isolated locations of some of the villages in Alaska make serving public health the biggest challenge and biggest reward imaginable. Despite those great professional experiences that I have had, the highlight of my internship has been the people. My co-workers have turned into close friends who share their love for Alaska by inviting me on spectacular trips into the wild. If I were to come back to work in Alaska with the U.S. Public Health Service, I know that I would be coming back to a well-paid and rewarding job, but more importantly, I would be coming back to a great group of friends!