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JrCOSTEP Summer 2011
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This summer I was fortunate enough to work with the Bemidji Area Indian Health Service in a wide variety of Environmental Health related activities. First of all, I would like to emphasize how great of a learning experience was. Not only was it extremely beneficial in helping me develop my own interests within the EH field, it was a great opportunity to work with a diverse group of people with different specialties. I had never been to the Minnesota area before so this was a chance to explore new places as well as gain EH experience.



A large portion of my time here was spent focused on a sustainability project that ties in with public health. The reservations in the surrounding areas which are, Red Lake Reservation, White Earth Reservation and Leech Lake Reservation, all have very high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Childhood diabetes is also very prevalent. The Leech Lake Green Team began a composting project to build 3 large scale compost bins that the community of Leech Lake will be able to use, and the nutrient rich soil will be dispersed to community and individual gardens. This will hopefully spark a trend for growing and cooking with healthier foods. The composting is just one of the puzzle pieces in the grand scheme to reduce food-related diseases. I researched a tool called PhotoVoice to go along with the composting project. PhotoVoice is a method used for community members to voice their opinion/concerns/needs through photography. I took the outline for PhotoVoice which was developed by Carolyn Wang and altered it so it would fit the composting project at Leech Lake. With input from co-workers and members of these communities I was able to design a program where several cameras were given to leaders at each one of the composting sites. I set up the “building blocks” so that the project could be continued after my internship was over. Hopefully with time, this project will display the efforts of the schools, clinics, and organizations to incorporate traditional sustainability and food sovereignty into their communities, and invoke some sort of policy changes from the Tribal Councils. In conjunction with the composting project, I got to attend the first meeting of the Leech Lake Childhood Obesity Task Force, and a meeting at a local food co-op where they are in the process of designing and opening a community kitchen. Through this, I was able to meet a lot of wonderful people and get involved in several different groups who all have similar goals in the field of public health.

The Indian Health Service utilizes a web program called WebCident to report incidents and near-misses that occur in an IHS facility. The program categorizes injuries

and security events by many different factors such as when and where the incident took place, the method of injury and the type of injury sustained. I went through and analyzed the data from 2007 to 2010 to try and find areas that may need addressing to help reduce the number of incidents. This exposed me and made me familiar with things such as lifting guidelines, blood borne pathogen risks, slips trips and falls risks.



Another focus that I had summer was on surveys. I travelled to Morton, which is on the Lower Sioux Reservation in Southern Minnesota and helped survey the hotel, casino, restaurants, daycare center, and the pool at the Jackpot Junction Casino Hotel. For me, this was a two day crash course in the application of my EH skills. We also did hazard analysis surveys at the White Earth Health Clinic and at the Bemidji Federal Building where the Bemidji Area Office is located. These surveys involved a complete walk through of the building. We were looking for things such as, trip hazards, completed sterilization logs, expired medical supplies, work safety issues, etc. At the Cass Lake Health Clinic on Leech Lake Reservation, we focused our attention to the isolation room (or negative pressure room) where a TB or other infectious disease patient would be held. We made sure the room had negative pressure and calculated the air changes per hour to make sure they were compliant with the Occupational Safety and Health Association (OSHA) and the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) standards. I was also able to dabble in some industrial hygiene and check the dental x-ray equipment at two health clinics to monitor radiation output. With all of these surveys, a report follows providing recommendations to any unsatisfactory finding. For me, there is no better way to learn the regulation guidelines than by seeing and applying them in a real applicable setting. There was rarely a day I didn't have something that gave me a hands on setting.

Outside of work, I got to travel around Minnesota. I spent some time in Duluth and Minneapolis. Being from Colorado, it was fun to explore the lakes and country. The "Minnesota Nice" was so wonderful to experience and it will most likely draw me back for a few visits (if you don't know what this is, come to MN and you will find out quickly).

I feel very privileged to have participated in such a great program. When I originally thought of the word "internship" I imagined doing busy work as a person lower on the hierarchy in the workplace. My COSTEP experience has been anything but that. My co-workers made it their priority to teach me as much as they can and give me an experience that will benefit my future goals. They were all very welcoming and helpful throughout my experience. I encourage other students to pursue the JrCOSTEP opportunity, as it is a great public health experience.

