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Putting Theory Into Practice— CDC’s Summer Program in Environmental Health (SUPEH)

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Editor's Note: NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature a column from the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In this column, EHSB and guest authors from across CDC will highlight a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health. EHSB's objective is to strengthen the role of state, local, and national environmental health programs and professionals to anticipate, identify, and respond to adverse environmental exposures and the consequences of these exposures for human health. The services being developed through EHSB include access to topical, relevant, and scientific information; consultation; and assistance to environmental health specialists, sanitarians, and environmental health professionals and practitioners.

The conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) environmental health internship is an educational experience exposing students to a field that requires diverse competencies in areas that range from sampling and conducting investigations to critical thinking and effective communication. These competencies are partially identified by NEHA, which lists 15 technical content areas in

which the registered environmental health specialist (REHS) should be proficient (see sidebar on page 97). In addition to these technical competencies, 14 core competencies for environmental health practitioners have been identified by an expert panel convened by the American Public Health Association (APHA) and CDC (see sidebar on page 98). Diverse competency requirements reinforce the importance of

exposing environmental health interns to the many aspects of the profession, both technical and professional.

The CDC Summer Program in Environmental Health (SUPEH) is designed to provide interns with a broad internship experience while exposing them to the technical and core competencies mentioned above. SUPEH is a 10-week program that exposes students to field practices and operations in a variety of environmental health topic areas at the local, state, and federal government levels. Four interns are selected by a competitive process on the basis of academic performance, quality of written essays, and professional references. Interns are located within the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) of CDC and assigned to the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB). Eligible students must be majoring in environmental health at academic programs accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC).

SUPEH builds environmental health-based knowledge by providing opportunities to engage in field work, project management, professional development, and mentorship. Prior to arrival, interns are asked about preferences regarding a specific area in environmental health. NCEH attempts to align each intern's stated interests with a project that the intern completes over the course of the summer. Roughly 50% of the intern's time is spent completing the project, while the other 50% is spent immersing the intern into a comprehensive



Kyle Hobson (Old Dominion University) conducts a pool inspection alongside a county environmental health specialist. Photo courtesy of CDC.



Rachel Spencer (University of Georgia) reviews data from an epidemiological investigation. Photo courtesy of CDC.

environmental health learning environment. This comprehensive portion of the program is intended to expose an intern not only to technical aspects of the environmental health field, but also to administrative and professional requirements typically imposed on effective environmental health practitioners.

Immersion in the subject field begins with the intern's shadowing at a metropolitan Atlanta environmental health department. Interns are able to witness and experience real-world application of skills in areas such as food safety, vector control, and land use assessment. In addition, interns have opportunities to observe environmental health activities at a variety of state agencies and within federal programs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration, National Park Service, and CDC. Mentorship and professional development are the other key program components. The intern is assigned a mentor within CDC. This mentor provides a glimpse into the life of a practicing environmental health professional. The mentorship also allows an intern a chance to seek guidance on making career-oriented decisions. Additionally, interns are encouraged to meet with CDC staff in program

areas of interest. Aside from developing professional attributes during field experiences and mentoring, interns learn about a variety of foundational skills, such as developing effective communication abilities while attending seminars sponsored by other CDC internship programs.

Past interns have expressed appreciation for the experience and benefits gained from participating in an internship that provides for broad exposures. When asked about her SUPEH experience, Hannah Reed of Colorado State University replied, "The internship was everything I expected and more. When I applied to the SUPEH program, I was hoping to gain a holistic view of what it means to work in environmental health, and program staff did a fantastic job exposing us to the field." Abigail Boorstin, University of Georgia, had similar feelings: "All of these experiences allowed me to gain a better understanding of environmental health as it applies to the world around us. New career paths were illuminated, and I now know how important public health professionals are to the everyday, overall health and success of the entire country."

SUPEH takes a holistic approach to providing an internship program that will benefit both the student and the student's future

Technical Content Areas of NEHA's Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) Exam

(NEHA, 2006)

1. General Environmental Health
2. Statutes and Regulations
3. Food Protection
4. Potable Water
5. Wastewater
6. Solid and Hazardous Waste
7. Hazardous Materials
8. Zoonoses, Vectors, Pets, and Poisonous Plants
9. Radiation Protection
10. Occupational Safety and Health
11. Air Quality and Environmental Noise
12. Housing Sanitation and Safety
13. Institutions and Licensed Establishments
14. Swimming Pools and Recreational Facilities
15. Disaster Sanitation

Recommendations for Core Competencies for Local Environmental Health Practitioners

A. Assessment

Information Gathering
Data Analysis & Interpretation
Evaluation

B. Management

Problem Solving
Economic & Political Issues
Organizational Knowledge & Behavior
Project Management
Computer & Information Technology
Reporting, Documentation, and
Record Keeping
Collaboration

C. Communication

Education -
Communication -
Conflict Resolution -
Marketing -

(American Public Health Association and National Center for Environmental Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001)

employer. By virtue of providing diverse field experiences, the internship better prepares college graduates for future professional endeavors as environmental health practitioners. By encouraging student curiosity and open communication with supervisors, the internship also allows students to gain valuable insight into potential career tracks and opportunities. Finally, SUPEH encourages organizations that host environmental health interns to consider taking a SUPEH-type approach to provide a well-rounded internship experience.

The deadline for SUPEH application submissions is February 2, 2011. More information about SUPEH is available at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/supeh/. CDC also offers other environmental health internship opportunities, such as the program Collegiate Leaders in Environmental Health, for students majoring in environmental studies, engineering, chemistry, biology, ecology, or related fields. Learn more at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Workforce_Development/internship.htm.

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