

Environmental Health Internship Essentials

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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 CDC.

CDC's Summer Program in Environmental Health is a 10-week internship for students majoring in environmental health.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Summer Program in Environmental Health (SUPEH) provides students in academic programs accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) an opportunity to experience environmental health practice at the local, state, and federal levels. The internship exposes students to the aspects of the environmental health profession, from hands-on

activities in the field to environmental health management in the office. Typically, the internship is the student's first glimpse into the real-world application of environmental health science.

As interns, we recognized early on that environmental health practitioners must possess a wide range of competencies to be effective at promoting and improving environmental health. Based on observations during our internship, we recognized a need to

continually develop not only technical skills and abilities but also competencies as well-rounded professionals. Those competencies fall under the three categories identified by the Environmental Health Core Competency Project: assessment, management, and communication (American Public Health Association and National Center for Environmental Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). This column gives our unique perspectives as four environmental health interns who experienced, for the first time, general environmental health practice through the eyes of practitioners.

Technical

Academic environmental health curriculums provide instruction in the broad technical areas of the field, such as food protection and water quality. Understanding the various areas of the science helped us to think critically and analyze complex situations, as we realized practitioners do not always encounter "textbook" cases. We found this to be especially true when we conducted facility inspections during which interrelated environmental factors were found. All of the broad topics we learned from our course work could be applied in one facility on an inspection. When attempting to solve health problems, environmental health professionals must take a systems-based approach, consider the environment as a whole, and understand the relationship and connections between contributing factors.

Assessment

Practically every field activity was an exercise in assessment and a reminder about



Alex Choo (left), Maha Syed, and Victoria Sellers (right) prepare for a community-based vector control activity.

the complexity of environmental health problems. During inspections, we used the combination of visual observations and sampling to inform stakeholders about potential health risks. Completing our projects required analysis of data collected from investigations, inspections, and interviews with subject-matter experts to make a correct assessment. The experience taught us that environmental health professionals generate a significant amount of data and consideration must be given to how the data can be used to ensure that accurate information is conveyed to the public.

Management

Early in the internship, we developed an appreciation for the fact that environmental health professionals not only work in the field but also have responsibilities in the office. We received an introduction to the work that happens somewhat “behind the scenes.” While we were not involved with budgeting and supervising, we did have an opportunity to learn about aspects of other management activities. We realized the importance of accurate reporting, recording, and documenting work. Project assignments required us to solve problems, meet deadlines, and collaborate with coworkers. The assignments also provided insight into other important aspects such as managing relationships with coworkers and being organized and proactive.

Communication

Whether written or spoken, in the field or of office, communication was a common theme with every internship activity. During field experiences, we learned that clearly explaining results and findings to ensure risks are understood is critical. This lesson was reinforced by the potential for serious health consequences if inspection or investigation results were misinterpreted. We were able to practice public speaking by providing training, giving presentations, and attending seminars and workshops. In addition to verbal expression, we discovered the importance of forming effective health messages in writing. The take-home message was that environmental health professionals must effectively relay the results of their activities to best benefit the public and preserve health.

A Great Opportunity

The SUPEH program provided opportunities for us to get out in the field, work with practitioners, and learn about environmental health practice in a comprehensive fashion. We worked closely with our supervisors, mentors, and peers, developing lasting relationships and gaining vital skills that we will benefit from in the future as environmental health professionals. The goal of an internship is to provide students with experience through a comprehensive introduction to a professional career. We witnessed firsthand how a challenging, well-rounded internship can have a significant impact on future



Jacob Gerke directs an environmental health emergency response exercise.

environmental health practitioners in terms of professional growth and future career goals. We encourage environmental health interns and supervisors to seek or provide internships that allow the student the benefit of experiencing all that an environmental health professional encounters.

More information about SUPEH is available at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/supeh/. CDC also offers other environmental health internship opportunities, such as the 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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