

My JrCOSTEP Experience With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Environmental Health Services Branch, Atlanta, Georgia, Summer 2007

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As I think about my summer internship experience, I am still thrilled with the great opportunities I was afforded as a JrCOSTEP with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)/National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH)/Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB). Before beginning the JrCOSTEP process I knew very little the U.S. Public Health Service and the tremendous job it does to protect the health of not only people in the United States, but throughout the world.

After graduating from Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) with a BA in Pre-Med Biological Sciences, I was unsure whether to attend medical school or graduate school—at least until I met CAPT Dan Harper, a USPHS employee at CDC and a visiting professor at my alma mater. When I met CAPT Harper, he asked me what I planned to do after receiving my BA. Before I could give an unsure answer that made me sound as if I didn't know what to do with my life, he told me about the Public Health graduate program at EKU. He also spoke about the opportunities with the USPHS. I was particularly interested in the possibility of a JrCOSTEP experience that might be possible when I reached the practicum portion of my graduate curriculum. Following his advice, I proceeded with graduate studies toward a Masters of Public Health with an emphasis in Environmental Health Science.

When it came time for me to complete a practicum, I was accepted into the JrCOSTEP program for an assignment to NCEH/EHSB. When I received my call to active duty from CAPT Harper I was so excited: all I remember him saying on the phone that day was that I would be working with him at CDC and telling me my start date. I was so elated that everything else he said was a blur to me.

Arrival at CDC

When I arrived at CDC in May it had to be one of the best feelings of my life. It was a dream come true to walk inside one of the most prestigious federal health agencies in the world as an intern. I knew that working for CDC would give me the opportunity to work with a team of experts on societal health issues at the federal level. On the first day I went over the schedule planned out by CAPT Harper. I was amazed at the amount of experience I was going to receive. My hope was to gain a broad array of experiences within different areas of the environmental health, and that was exactly what was scheduled for me. I would be working with EHSB, Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP), Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Fulton and Clayton County Health Departments. Along with working with the various agencies, I was also given a summer assignment to assist my preceptor in developing an online healthy housing course that could be accessed through the CDC Web site.

Environmental Health Training

To begin my summer experience, I accompanied EHSB's CAPT Mark Miller to Louisville, Kentucky, to help branch staff provide Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response to the local and state health departments. This training was very interesting because I learned more about how the local, state, and federal health agencies interact in emergency situations and how important the role of the local environmental health practitioners really is.



Fulton and Clayton County Health Departments

After returning to Atlanta, my next assignment was to work at the Fulton and Clayton County Health Departments. This is where I had the opportunity to view health issues on the local level.



Some of the areas I participated in were food safety (e.g., inspecting the kitchen facilities at Grady Hospital). This taught me

- how to take food temperatures,
- proper cleaning and sanitizing methods, and
- policies so institutional kitchens can operate safely and protect the health of staff and patients.

My food safety training also involved reviewing building plans. This helped me understand how the many policies and components of food safety come together to ensure that a restaurant is safe before it can open for business.

I also inspected public swimming pools before their opening dates and learned about septic tanks and leaching field design and installation. I participated in a site visit of a septic system installation with the local health department. I learned that local health departments are where the frontline work is done. Local health departments continually interact with the public as field work is conducted to ensure the public's health is safeguarded.



Vessel Sanitation Program

My next scheduled duty was with CDC's VSP. We flew to Puerto Rico to conduct ship inspections. This area of environmental health is very interesting, and many people are unaware of the tremendous services provided and how important this is to the cruise industry.

While accompanying the VSP inspectors, I saw how three inspectors inspect a cruise ship; each person usually inspects three to four areas. I assisted with food preparation areas, food storage areas, housekeeping records, and medical records. By far this experience had to be the highlight of my JrCOSTEP.



Under the supervision of CAPT George Vaughan, we

- made sure that the food storage areas were in proper compliance according to VSP guidelines,
- tested food temperatures in the food preparation areas,
- reviewed the housekeepers' cleaning schedule, and
- reviewed the medical records for possible outbreaks that were not reported to CDC.



I really enjoyed reviewing the medical records and was able to understand the reporting process for potential outbreaks, such as norovirus outbreaks, that sometimes occur on the ships. Using these records, we were able to determine the number of passengers and crew members who had gastrointestinal illness on previous cruises. We were also able to trace back the point of infection using surveys that had been distributed to the infected passengers and crew. Because I have a medical background, this part of the inspection was the most rewarding to me.

I also attended the VSP training conducted for the cruise industry several times each year. This provides formal training to cruise industry employees on the importance of environmental public health. This training allows VSP officers to work out any concerns or questions the cruise industry employees may have. It also helps the cruise industry understand what is critically important to protecting the passengers' and crews' health and why.

Earthquake Response Training

Toward the conclusion of my JrCOSTEP experience, I had the privilege of traveling to Camp Bullis, Texas, with ATSDR's CAPT Sven Rodenbeck for earthquake response training. We learned first-response protocols for an earthquake emergency as well as important team-building skills. This experience gave me an opportunity to see how USPHS officers respond to certain disasters and find out what is important to know when dealing with any disasters.

Each day we split up into teams and attended classroom sessions where we discussed the focus of interest for each team (e.g., logistics, computer technology, EMS, environmental health). Everything we learned was utilized in a 24-hour field experience. During the field experience, a field triage hospital was set up to treat patients during and after a severe disaster such as a high point earthquake. By far this was the best part of the training. Army cadets were used as injured patients and were admitted into the hospital; USPHS officers had to assist them accordingly.

During this part of the training we used a lot of teamwork skills to provide an organized system to help patients in a dysfunctional emergency event.

Final Thoughts

This summer was extremely educational and rewarding to my future career in public health. I was able to expand my knowledge in my degree area as well as in other areas of public health. I am so thankful I was able to receive a JrCOSTEP position this summer; it was truly a life-changing experience. I now see the importance of public health in a broader perspective, as well as the importance of USPHS officers and how much they are needed in our society with its many public health issues.