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Extern Summer 2024
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This summer, I had the invaluable opportunity to be an extern with the Indian Health Service (IHS). I am currently a senior majoring in Environmental Health and Safety/Public Health at Central Michigan University, graduating in December 2024. I first learned about this opportunity through a presentation about IHS in a class my freshman year by LCDR Shelby Haddeland, who is a Central Michigan alum. When I was given this opportunity, I was excited to apply my academic knowledge to a real-world setting and contribute to the health and well-being of indigenous communities. My externship provided valuable hands-on experience that complemented my studies and deepened my understanding of environmental public health issues.



My duty station was in the IHS Bemidji Area, in the Mount Pleasant Field Office. The office covers six tribes, Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band (Gun Lake Tribe), Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi, Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, and Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan. Under the guidance of my preceptor Alan Bloch, and William Bloomfield, I gained a comprehensive understanding of an Environmental Health Specialist's responsibilities and the broader scope of work within the IHS framework. The program responsibilities were diverse, encompassing a wide range of services. With the tribes this summer, I was able to gain experience and work in several different settings, including food establishments, playgrounds, pools,

preschools, casinos, powwow grounds/recreational facilities, vector control, and general institutional safety. During my externship I was lucky enough to also lead several food surveys in casinos, do a temporary food survey at the Gun Lake Powwow myself, and write my own reports in the Web-based Environmental Health Reporting System (WebEHRS).

I was able to collaborate with local health departments, which expanded my practical experience and deepened my understanding of public health operations. At Central Michigan District Health Department, I was involved in a range of activities including well and septic inspections, type 2 water program surveys, pool surveys, and beach testing. Additionally, I worked with Midland Health Department where I engaged in similar well and septic inspections, water sampling, and body art facility inspections. These tasks provided me with further hands-on experience in environmental health assessments and networking opportunities.



My primary project this summer focused on enhancing food safety, particularly concerning reduced oxygen packaging, which is a method that can pose significant risks if not handled correctly. Through a series of inspections I performed, as well as previous inspections, it was identified that improper processes were being used according to the FDA Food Code, which heightened the risk of foodborne illness. I developed an educational presentation aimed at breaking down the complexity of the Food Code into more understandable and easier to communicate terms. This presentation served as a tool in opening further communication between IHS and the tribe, allowing us to collaboratively work towards improving safe food practices. I am hoping that through fostering open dialogue, IHS can continue to make strides in ensuring that the food safety standards are being met and embraced.



I would highly recommend the IHS COSTEP/Extern program to other students interested in environmental health, particularly those interested in working with indigenous populations or in rural settings. The experience provided me with practical skills, cultural insights, and a deeper understanding of public health in diverse communities. I can confidently say that it was one of the most enriching experiences of my academic and professional journey. What I enjoyed most was the opportunity to apply my academic knowledge in a real-world setting, making me feel much more confident in my environmental health knowledge and feeling better prepared for pursuing employment after graduation. My externship with Indian Health Service has not only strengthened my commitment to pursuing a career in public health, but also provided me with the skills and experiences necessary to succeed in my future career.