

Working with the USPHS: An Adventure Waiting to Happen

by Martha Phillips

In August 2005, I found myself sitting in a clinic in a town of 5,000 people on the northern part of the Navajo Reservation, trying to learn a sliver of the rolling, whispering, tripping native language. Chatting with Navajo nurses and aides, I was attempting to repeat the word for “banana bread,” which we were eating during a lull in appointments. I had dutifully written it down in broken phonetics in my pocket notebook and I cleared my throat and made my best attempt.

It was promptly greeted by laughter from my impromptu tutor, Gwen. After several attempts which prompted Gwen to call over the rest of the clinic’s staff, they doubled over in hysterics as Gwen informed me that in my pronunciation attempts, I’d inadvertently made an innuendo unintended for publication.

So how did I, a nursing student 2000 miles away from my Milwaukee home, find myself in the middle of the Navajo Nation, unintentionally amusing my peers? I had found the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) and had done so almost by accident. Starting my junior year at the College of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I decided to pursue a job in the Indian Health Service (IHS). Impatient for experience, I called a recruiter



The desert region near Kayenta, Arizona.
Photo courtesy of the author

and asked if the IHS offered any summer internships. “No,” she replied, “but the US Public Health Service does.” My response: “Who?”

The Commissioned Corps of the USPHS is a group of approximately 6,000 professionals who serve the nation through a variety of federal agencies. We are one of the seven Uniformed Services of the United States, under the leadership of the U.S. Surgeon General, Vice Admiral Richard H. Carmona. Our mission is to: “Carry out programs to promote the health of the Nation, understand and prevent disease and injury, assure safe and effective drugs and medical devices, deliver health services to federal

beneficiaries, and furnish health expertise in time of war or other national or international emergencies” (Mission of the Commissioned Corps, PHS).

Because of the scope of this mission, the Corps includes nurses, as well as physicians, therapists, dentists, pharmacists, dietitians, veterinarians, engineers, and scientists.

Once licensed, any baccalaureate-prepared Registered Nurse can apply to join the Corps. Students interested in learning about the Corps can participate in the Junior COSTEP (Commissioned Officer Student Training Externship Program). Students apply to work for a period of 30 to 120 days in the agency of their choice and in their discipline, and are commissioned as an Ensign for the duration of their orders. Most students work during their summer vacation. Once their assignment is complete, students owe no further service to the Corps or their agency.

There is also a higher-level program for students, the Senior COSTEP. This program is designed to assist students financially during their final year of school; in return, students agree to work for the USPHS after graduation. The payback time equals twice the time sponsored (e.g., 8 months of sponsorship incurs a 16-month obligation). Students are commissioned as an Ensign for the duration of their sponsorship, and promoted in rank after graduation. While the JRCOSTEP is a competitive program, the standards used to select SRCOSTEP students are exceptionally high, and only a handful of seniors across the country are offered a commission.

The IHS recruiter directed me to the USPHS website where I spent about thirty minutes sitting in front of my computer, wondering how I had never even heard of the Corps before. I started my application that evening in October, and although I was working toward a December 31 deadline, it hardly felt like enough time. I submit-

ted the five-page application – which came with ten pages of instructions – four references, official copies of all of my college transcripts, and added my resume and letter of introduction for good measure. I then proceeded to call the COSTEP technician at USPHS headquarters with regularity to check on the status of my application and to ensure that it stayed current.

The agencies served by the USPHS met in early 2005, and after months of anticipation, I received the phone call I’d been waiting for in March. I was offered a Senior COSTEP position with the Indian Health Service. Due to the critical shortage of nurses on the Navajo Nation, I was to be assigned to Kayenta, Arizona, upon my graduation and licensure.

I accepted immediately and would have spent my summer in Milwaukee if I hadn’t gone to NSNA’s National Convention in Salt Lake City that spring. (Remember, the Senior COSTEP is a financial assistance program, not an externship at an agency. Externships at agencies are part of a JRCOSTEP).

In Salt Lake, I had the honor of meeting the U.S. Surgeon General and Captain Regena Dale, a Nurse Officer who, once she found out I had a summer free and no JRCOSTEP waiting for me, advocated on my behalf to the Navajo Area office of the IHS.

On July 17, 2005, I stepped out of an airplane in Page, Arizona, and into the desert. Kayenta is a two-hour drive from Page. The nurse manager of the Kayenta Health Center (KHC) picked me up and drove me to my home for the next six weeks. “K-town” is a mining town – the Peabody and Kayenta coal mines rest just out of sight over the edge of Black Mesa, which towers over everything. It is located in a highly traditional part of the Navajo Nation, and many of the people in this area (especially traditional elders) continue to eek out a subsistence living by raising sheep and other livestock on the outskirts of town. It’s a safe bet here that anyone born before 1940 speaks pri-

AGENCIES WHERE USPHS OFFICERS SERVE:

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)
- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)
- Indian Health Service (IHS)
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- Office of Public Health and Science (OPHS)
- Program Support Center (PSC)
- Bureau of Prisons, Federal (BoP)
- District of Columbia Commission on Mental Health Services (CMHS)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS – formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS))
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- National Park Service (NPS)
- U.S. Coast Guard (USCG)
- U.S. Marshals Service (USMS)
- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)



The author hiking near Kayenta.

marily Navajo and very little English.

KHC serves over 200 patients each day with both outpatient and emergency services. There are two outpatient wings, a 24-7 emergency room, a pharmacy, optometry and dental facilities, a public health program, as well as behavioral, occupational, and environmental health programs, but no inpatient beds.

I spent my summer working in the Outpatient Department (OPD). OPD runs between two and six clinics every morning and afternoon. Each clinic is led by a doctor specializing in a particular aspect of health care. KHC runs a huge

variety of clinics, from diabetes and prenatal to one for uranium miners and another for limb-and-brace. Many of the staff doctors specialize in several disciplines, but physicians also visit regularly from clinics in Farmington and Tuba City.

My job – a big change from my prior experience on urban medical-surgical units – started with completing an intake assessment on every patient and continued with assisting the doctors as needed. Not only did I have to quickly brush up on my personal history assessment skills, I also assisted in a variety of procedures including remov-

ing ticks from ears. While the eldest patient I worked with was well over ninety, the youngest patient I worked with was about thirty seconds old. In early August, a woman came to our emergency department in active labor. The closest hospital is over an hour away in Chinle, and neither a critical care ambulance nor helicopter was able to respond. We prepared to deliver the child at the Health Center. The staff allowed me to help, and I assisted in delivering a healthy baby boy.

My experience in Kayenta was an overwhelmingly positive one. I came to the clinic with humility and expecting hard work, ready to learn from everyone. The Navajo nurses and aides both taught me and challenged me, helping me keep up with the frantic pace at which the clinic frequently operates.

I not only enjoyed learning how to best serve the clinic and the Navajo patients there, but also aspects of the Navajo culture and the culture of Kayenta. The nurses frequently brought me along to the Wednesday flea market, where I ate mutton and fry bread and tamales. One nurse invited me to join her family at a sheep slaughter in preparation for a birthday party; she later took me horseback riding through Monument Valley. And some of the most interesting conversations I had took place on lazy Sunday mornings at the laundromat, watching everyone shake the red sand from their clothes before tossing them into the enormous washers.

This is not a job for everyone. The locations of the jobs in the Indian Health Service are frequently remote and isolated. The hours are long – officers of the USPHS are always on-call, even while on vacation – and agencies suffer the wax and wane of the federal budget; operating without the newest or fanciest equipment, fighting against chronic staffing shortages.

But if you are energetic, adventuresome, willing to travel and experience different cultures, and ready to work hard and advocate for some of the most

under-served populations of the United States, the USPHS has a job for you.

I knew from the moment I saw their website that I was meant to be a Nurse Officer of the USPHS. I'm ready to begin my career, and look forward to returning to Kayenta after my graduation. I'm accumulating the certifications necessary to work in their emergency department, and getting mentally prepared to change my life entirely. But more importantly, I am practicing my Navajo and avoiding any phrase that includes the word "banana." ☺

references

Mission of the Commissioned Corps, Public Health Service (PHS). (n.d.) Retrieved November 28, 2005 from www.usphs.gov/html/mission.html



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For More Information

<http://www.usphs.gov> – The Commissioned Corps of the United States Public Health Service (and a wealth of information about the Corps and the COSTEP programs).

<http://dcp.psc.gov> – USPHS Commissioned Corps Management Information Systems. Information on current events and documents of the Corps.

<http://phs-nurse.org/> -- US Public Health Service Nursing, under the leadership of Rear Admiral Carol Romano.

<http://www.ihs.gov> – Indian Health Service, including a national job vacancy database

If you are interested in applying to the Corps or a COSTEP program, and have further questions after reading through the USPHS websites, please e-mail phs@hhs.gov, or call 800-279-1605 or 240-453-6072.