CDC Public Health Associate Host Site Program

The Public Health Associate Program (PHAP) is a two-year training program with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in which associates are assigned to public health agencies across the United States. The Clay County Health Department was the first PHAP host site in Illinois and has been a host site for associates since 2011.

The Clay County Health Department has hosted several Public Health Associates.

Following are profiles on four of them.

**Read about Clay County’s PHAP graduates:**

**Gretchen (CCHD PHAP from 2011 – 2013)**

{Gretchen was the first Public Health Associate placed in the State of Illinois}

**Year 1 Assignment: Chronic Disease**

**Year 2 Assignment: Emergency Preparedness**

I am from the San Francisco Bay Area and graduated from the University of California, Davis with a Bachelor of Science in Exercise Biology and a minor in Economics in 2010. During PHAP, I started my Masters in Public Health at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill as a distance student, and completed my MPH in 2015.

I coordinated the county’s community health assessment and community health improvement plan, started the local Medical Reserve Corps unit, conducted disaster preparedness trainings with staff, and planned a full-scale mass medication dispensing exercise.

After PHAP, I continued with the CDC’s Division of State and Local Readiness, Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response as a Preparedness Field Assignee at the Idaho Department of Health & Welfare. Ultimately, I wanted to move back to California to be closer to family, and in November 2013, I accepted a position with the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) as the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Coordinator. In this role, I was responsible for grants management and coordination, maintenance and revisions to emergency plans and procedures, planning and conduct of exercises and special events activations, and disaster service worker trainings. I am currently a Senior Health Program Planner with SFDPH’s Office of Policy and Planning, working specifically on hospital compliance and local policy projects.

I’ve had so many great memories at CCHD it’s hard to pick a favorite! If I had to pick one, one of the most rewarding experiences was the day we conducted the mass prophylaxis full-scale exercise. Prior to starting PHAP, I wasn’t familiar with public health emergency preparedness, and truly had no understanding of the field. Because of my experience at CCHD and the leadership opportunities provided to me, I developed an affinity for emergency preparedness and response. Post PHAP, I have continued to take opportunities to work on public health emergency activations, including a recent deployment to assist in the Camp Fire response.

**Words of wisdom to any incoming associates:** Be open. I grew up in an urban environment, and I had never imagined myself re-locating to the rural Midwest, but I’m glad I did. My experience at CCHD has served as the foundation to jump-start my public health career. CCHD provided me with incredible professional development opportunities and allowed me to take ownership of projects with significant scope and responsibility.
Michelle (CCHD PHAP from 2013 – 2015)

Year 1 Assignment: Emergency Preparedness

Year 2 Assignment: Chronic Disease

I grew up in Portland, Oregon and studied biology at Santa Clara University. PHAP was my first post-college job and my first time living in a rural area. During college, I worked as an EMT and coordinated SCU's Special Olympics program. I was also involved in global health initiatives around empowerment of girls in the Gambia. I was (and still am) very interested in infectious diseases, the health of underserved populations, and global health.

During my first year, I think my greatest accomplishment was strengthening the Clay County Medical Reserve Corps (MRC). During my second year, I led health promotion initiatives, including the county health coalition and county-wide obesity prevention programs. This was also fun because it allowed me to get more involved in the community through our programming (such as coordinating a Zumba night and health fair). However, my true interest in public health was in infectious diseases. This was not part of my assignment by the CDC, but I worked with the CCHD Administrator to find ways to work on projects in this area. Another significant project was traveling to Baltimore for two months during the Ebola outbreak to manage the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s Ebola Call Center. I finished PHAP in 2015 and began a Master of Public Health program at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH). I focused on Health in Crisis and Humanitarian Assistance and Infectious Disease. I completed a certificate in Epidemiology for Public Health Professionals and was involved in research around HIV and syringe exchange programs. After graduating from JHSPH, I worked at Housing Works in Brooklyn, New York as a Policy and Advocacy Associate through Global Health Corps. I recently began medical school at UCSF to pursue a medical career in infectious disease.

Here are a couple of my favorite things about my two years at CCHD: Support to pursue projects and trainings I was interested in. The health department is small and departments are overlapping. This means there was flexibility in what projects I worked on and what trainings I could attend. If there was something I found interesting, my supervisor helped me find a way to get involved.

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: When I was assigned to a rural health department, I was nervous and a little disappointed. I was worried about making friends, how I would spend my time, and whether I would fit in. I can't emphasize enough how different your experience can be based on how you approach it - there are amazing and unique things to experience by living and working in Clay County. If I could go back in time and choose my site placement, I would not change my placement from CCHD. However, I would find more ways to get involved in interests outside of the health department. Because it's a small town, it's easier to get connected to people.
Emily (CCHD PHAP from 2014 – 2016)

Year 1 Assignment: Environmental Health

Year 2 Assignment: Emergency Preparedness

I am originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota. I did my undergraduate degree at the University of California: Los Angeles in Biology. Clay County was a big change from my urban background. In fact, Flora is about the same size as my college graduating class! During my PHAP assignment, I gained robust experience in environmental health, emergency preparedness and more generally, local health department operations. I learned first-hand about rural health disparities, and about the organizations that work hard to improve the health of their communities. I got to be directly involved in all aspects of the food, water, sewage, nuisance, vector, and solid waste programs. After my first year, I passed the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) exam. I also got a chance to start an “Earth Day Fair” in Clay County. During my second year, my most significant accomplishment was leading Illinois’s first Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER). CASPER is a CDC tool that involves interviewing citizens door-to-door in sampled households about their public health needs. We used it as a way to rapidly gain primary source public health data for use in a Community Health Assessment. I was able to present about CASPER at several state and one national conference.

Since graduating PHAP in October 2016, I enrolled in an MPH/MBA degree program at Benedictine University and returned to Minnesota for a career in community health within a healthcare system. As the Community Health Program Manager at Essentia Health, I develop strategic activities and partnerships to achieve health and vitality with our communities. I focus on innovation in clinic prevention by extending care outside of clinic settings, strategically invest community benefit dollars, and lead community-wide health improvement strategies. Additionally, I lead the Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) process for 15 hospitals, including fostering key community partnerships, utilizing population health data, and implementing best practice interventions.

The experience at CCHD shaped my career goals because I developed a passion for rural communities and collaborative work with local partners. The hands-on experience at CCHD in grant writing, developing partnerships, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and evaluation made me a competitive applicant for many job opportunities.

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: I think there are several benefits about being an associate in a rural community. The breadth of opportunities is exhaustive. Most staff are generalists and have been working in the community for years. There is a lot of work to do and tons of ways to get involved in the community. The opportunity to get out totally out of your “comfort zone” is unique and valuable!
Andrea (CCHD PHAP from 2016 – 2018)
Year 1 Assignment: Environmental Health
Year 2 Assignment: Environmental Health

I am originally from Reno, Nevada. I received a Bachelor of Science with an emphasis in Public Health from the University of Washington, Seattle in 2011. A couple years later, I decided to pursue my MPH from the University of Nevada, Reno in Social and Behavioral Health and graduated in 2015. Prior to PHAP, I had experience with non-profits, academia, and state government. I have worked in various public health program areas including maternal, child and adolescent health, immunizations, and the Woman, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

Since graduating PHAP in October 2018, I have continued working for the CDC as a Preparedness Field Assignee in the Division of State and Local Readiness, Center for Preparedness and Response. My new host site is the Utah Department of Health in Salt Lake City, UT. My goal was to stay in the field and to move closer to home, and this position offered both. In my new role, I get to work collaboratively with the state and the local health districts on the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) Program. I am responsible for the Mass Care and Volunteer Management capabilities, but I work across all the domains. I believe my experience with CCHD has allowed me continue my career in Public Health Preparedness as Environmental Health is closely related. In addition, I am pursuing my Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential – I plan on taking (and passing) the exam this summer.

The experience at CCHD pushed me out of my comfort zone professionally and personally. I remember when I received my offer letter with the duty location of Flora, IL. Like any good millennial, I Googled it and then kept zooming out to figure out where it was located. I have never lived east of Reno or in a rural area, so moving out to Flora was a huge step out of my comfort zone. In addition, I had never imagined I would be working in Environmental Health - I took a few classes, but I never had any practical applications of Environmental Health. Taking on the regulatory role of Environmental Health was an adjustment, but I enjoyed the time I spent working with CCHD. No day was the same and when the phone rang you never knew who or what was on the other end. A lot of the work I did, regardless of the program, was building rapport with retail food workers, contractors and the public.

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: Local health departments are where the “rubber meets the road” and the experiences you gain are different and unique. I will reiterate what my predecessors have said about working in a rural community – you become a public health generalist. Some actual words of wisdom I received prior to moving was that you can do anything for two years. If you are a city person, consider Flora the epicenter of fun. You can go on weekend trips to St. Louis, Chicago, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Nashville, Louisville, and Memphis. I was able to travel to cities I would have never visited if I stayed on the West Coast.