Public Health Practice

Stories from the Field
The University of Texas School of Public Health
Student Practicum Experiences
Summer 2013 – Health Promotion & Behavioral Sciences
The practicum experience is an integral part of the MPH and DrPH curricula. Public health students are provided with the opportunity to apply their classroom knowledge to real world settings through which they make a meaningful contribution to a public health organization.

Under the guidance of a community preceptor and faculty sponsor, students from all divisions gain a deeper understanding of public health practice, interact with professionals in the field, and expand their repertoire of professional skills.

This eleventh-edition e-magazine showcases student practicum experiences throughout the Summer 2013 semester. (Prior semesters may be accessed through the e-book, a collection of student abstracts and e-magazines describing their experiences.)
# Practicum Topics

Serving Size: 1 Practicum per Student  
Servings per e-Magazine: 10

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## Health Promotion & Behavioral Sciences

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Public Health Significance

Brighter Bites has been a significant Public Health experience, because of its core principles. Lisa and John Helfman, the founders of Brighter Bites, recognized that obesity is a pressing issue in the U.S., and especially Houston.

They were able to recognize that a solution to the problem would need to include education and the removal of socioeconomic barriers. As a result, they galvanized existing organizations like the Food Bank, KIPP, and the YMCA into mobilizing and sharing resources to address the obesity issue. Brighter Bites bridges the gaps in the broken food system of Houston. It provides food and education, HEPA (Healthy Eating and Physical Activity) to those in ‘food deserts’ and links those communities to health care and food.

Though intimately working with parents of KIPP, Brighter Bites is able to develop long-term bonds with the community and through education, create the potential for self-sustainability. YMCA partnerships offer the ability to evaluate the success of the program in various ethnic groups.

Brightening Houston’s Outlook, One Bite at a Time

Hariharan Athreya

Brighter Bites is a organization that has partnered with the Houston Food Bank, to nutritiously and consciously find a way to fight hunger and obesity.

Brighter Bites serves the Houston community by providing up to 10 items of fresh produce, or approximately 50 lbs. of fresh produce to low-income families throughout Houston each week. In addition to providing food, Brighter Bites also supplied families with Nutritional handouts. These features combined with a standing nutritional and behavioral lesson for children are thought to help curb obesity rates in these communities.

My responsibilities for this project were to develop the curriculum, and help logistically organize the planning and distribution of food.

The final results of the level of impact Brighter Bites had on communities is being determined.

Before you act, Listen.

To be successful in leading societal change, like obesity prevention, you have to take “me” and “I” out of the equation. Listen. Truly listen to a community and pay attention to its needs. Only then do you have a chance to be even slightly effective.
Public Health Significance

The Public Health Essential Service(s) (PHES) that most closely relates to my practicum experience include:

- Monitor
- Diagnose and investigate
- Evaluate
- Research

The NHBS-HET2 at the epidemiology bureau of Houston department of health and human services collects data on the sexual and drug use behaviors and access to and use of prevention services. NHBS-HET2 contributes to public health by providing data for needs assessment, resource allocation, and prevention program development that target heterosexuals at risk for HIV infection.

The NHBS-HET2 also informs participants about their HIV status and links people to needed health services such as HIV prevention counseling and care for HIV-related risks.

Learning Objectives

- Learn and understand the implementation of Behavioral Surveillance.
- Analyze and interpret the Behavioral surveillance data.

Advice for Future Students

- I wanted to apply academic skills in the real world and I did. Start looking for a practicum in advance to find one that matches your interests and learning objectives.

National HIV Behavioral Surveillance System: Heterosexuals at Increased Risk for HIV (NHBS-HET2)

By: Yoojin Cho

My practicum took place at the epidemiology bureau of Houston department of health and human services. I was involved in the project named National HIV Behavioral Surveillance (NHBS).

The purpose of the NHBS system is to monitor HIV risk behaviors among high risk groups for HIV infection and evaluate prevention efforts. NHBS collects data from men who have sex with men (MSM), injecting drug users (IDU), and heterosexuals at risk for HIV infection (HET).

I developed research questions after reviewing NHBS peer-reviewed publications and analyzed NHBS data collected in 2010 from heterosexuals at increased risk for HIV infection (HET).

Route of Transmission among New HIV Infections in the United States 2010


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**SES and Behavioral Cancer Risk Factors**

**Coordinating the PATHS Study**

By: M. Leigh Cohen

During the summer of 2013, I assisted Dr. Darla Kendzor and her research team in conducting a study called “Pathways between Socioeconomic Status and Behavioral Cancer Risk Factors,” also known as “PATHS” for short. The study is sponsored by the American Cancer Society.

The goal of the research is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which low SES leads to poor health and behavior outcomes, which will hopefully allow for the development of effective multilevel and multiple behavior change interventions designed for at-risk populations in the future.

The study approach is traditional questionnaire measurement with ecological monetary assessment via smart phone, and objective physical activity measurement via an accelerometer.

I was responsible for telephone screening and subject screening on site, conducting all study procedures for visit 1 and 2, and data entry.

Results will not be shared at this time.

**Memorable Experiences**

- Conducting the Informed Consent Process
- Interacting with study participants

**Public Health Significance**

My practicum experience related to several of the Essential Services of Public Health. (See [http://www.apha.org/programs/standards/performancestandardsprogram/ressexentialservices.htm](http://www.apha.org/programs/standards/performancestandardsprogram/ressexentialservices.htm))

Specifically, the research conducted by Dr. Darla Kendzor and Dr. Michael Businelle monitors health status to identify community health problems and investigates health problems and health hazards in the community. Notably the primary study endpoints include cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, physical activity, fruit and vegetable consumption, and self-rated health over a 7-day period and this is of consequence because it is known that 40% of deaths in the United States are attributable to tobacco use, poor nutrition/obesity, physical inactivity, and alcohol consumption (Mokdad et al., 2004).


**Advice for Future Practicum Students**

Always follow the rules...research has a lot of rules and it is imperative that they are followed. No cutting corners or you could hurt your research team and the study participants!
Maternal & Child Health

The Lactation Foundation: A WIC Breastfeeding Resource and Training Center

By: Stephanie Johnson

The Lactation Foundation is a resource to the Houston community that helps primarily WIC eligible women with any issues and concerns related to breastfeeding. Three staff members run the clinic. Two members are certified lactation consultants/nurses and one functions as a secretary and lactation assistant.

As a public health intern I trained alongside these well-respected lactation consultants and was able to observe women with various breastfeeding issues receive help at the Lactation Foundation. Another responsibility I had was giving input and designing outreach materials for the foundation. This included providing feedback on the website, helping with materials for the center, and assisting with materials for support groups.

Public Health Significance

Although Texas breastfeeding initiation rates are high, the duration rates for breastfeeding are low; particularly, among low-income women. The Lactation Foundation addresses this issue by providing women with skills and resources that will help them continue breastfeeding.

The Lactation Foundation informs, educates, and empowers women from varied backgrounds all over the Houston community.

Throughout my time interning at the Lactation Foundation I saw the faces of many mothers who came to the Foundation as a last resort for help and were able to have their concerns resolved and receive the necessary reassurance to reach their breastfeeding goals.

The bottom line of the Lactation Foundation is to give women the knowledge and support to make breastfeeding work for them and to ultimately, improve the breastfeeding duration of Texas women.

Special events/duties during your practicum

- Designing outreach materials for the Lactation Foundation
- Accumulating hours of specialized training toward becoming a certified lactation consultant

Advice for future students

- Choose a practicum where the staff members are as passionate about the topic as you are. Their enthusiasm infilrates through you and allows you to see the limitless opportunities within reach.
The Alliance for African American Health in Central Texas is an Austin-based community organization that seeks to improve the health status of African Americans by creating sustainable changes within the community. We strive to educate and empower African Americans in order to curb chronic, preventable disease such as diabetes, HIV, obesity, cancer and cardiovascular disease.

Shannon Kearns
Summer 2013
AAAHCT
African American health

Public Health Significance

- In Travis County, more African Americans die from heart disease, cancer, diabetes, HIV, hypertension, homicide and other chronic diseases than white, non-Hispanic and Hispanic races.
- The Alliance aims to empower, inform, and educate African Americans in zip codes 78721 and 78723.
- Our long-term goal is to mobilize communities to create sustainable behavioral and environmental changes to improve physical and mental health.

Using Social Media to Empower
By: Shannon Kearns

Since I began working for the Alliance in January, we have made important progress in our target community. My main job was to help expand our social media presence by updating our website, Facebook, Twitter and blog and by generating electronic newsletters that match our paper flyers. Social media is extremely important in our intervention because we are sharing stories of role models from the community that encourage action and inspire behavioral change. We have successfully completed all of these tasks, have reached our year goal of 60 network members, and our information is reaching around 800 African Americans in Austin. Because I had so many different tasks within the Alliance, my main tactics were to stay organized and on-schedule. I learned quite a bit about how a community-based intervention works, especially with respect to engaging and empowering members. The Alliance now has a strong social media foundation that will allow us to reach more people with minimal resources. Our next steps will focus more on engaging rather than informing community members in order to create environmental changes.

Practicum Duties

- Interview role models
- Write Villager articles about role models
- Photograph role models
- Create electronic newsletters
- Redesign website
- Redesign Facebook page
- Post regularly on Facebook and blog
- Create paper flyers
- Create YouTube videos
- Email network members about events and updates
Physical Activity & Nutrition

Bridging the Gap between Physical Well-Being and Mental Health within a Congregate Care Program

By: Thuan Le

The Home for Little Wanderers is a not-for-profit organization based in Boston, Massachusetts. The Home makes a positive impact within the community via a wide array of services and programs to children and youths within the community. Primary services include but are not limited to individual, group, and family therapy, child and family skills development, therapeutic mentoring, and behavioral stabilization.

It was only recently The Home added “physical well-being” into their mission statement. This summer I was a programs operation wellness intern at The Home and my duties were to help launch a few pilot programs within the congregate care programs. I was able to have hands on experience regarding policy, program implementation, and evaluation.

My first major project was the Food, Fun, and Fitness Fair (F4). F4 was a day event open to all schools and their respective families. F4 promoted physical activity and healthy eating through fun, interactive games and demonstrations.

My second project was to implement FitnessGram, a Presidential Youth Fitness Program. I was responsible for writing up the manual to train Home staff members on how to properly implement the program and interpret the results.

Public Health Significance

Every day, The Home strives to provide seamless services and programs to ensure the safety and well-being of children and adolescents in the Boston area. This is achieved through 1) consistent monitoring of the health status of clients; identifying individualized and community health issues, 2) informing, educating, and empowering all HFLW staff members, children, adolescents, and families the appropriate methods to tackle these issues, 3) linking children, adolescents, and families to appropriate services, 4) developing, implementing, and enforcing policies and plans to support the organization’s efforts, and 5) consistently evaluating the effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of all programs, services, and events provided by The Home.

In recent years, The Home has been making positive strides towards bettering the lives of clients by promoting physical activity and good nutrition while simultaneously providing psychosocial therapeutic services. This summer I had the opportunity to evaluate and analyze The Home’s current food menu and policies, assist with the Food, Fun, and Fitness Fair, and help pilot FitnessGram within The Home’s congregate care programs. The Home takes a multipronged approach to combating childhood obesity with at-risk children and adolescents in the Boston, Massachusetts area and the staffs’ valiant efforts have not gone unnoticed.

Practicum Highlights

- Meeting community members whom were advocates for promoting physical well-being among children
- Interacting with clients
- Having the opportunity to take on leadership roles and responsibilities

Advice for Future Practicum Students

Communication is key, do not be afraid to ask, stay open-minded, and believe in yourself!
Community Gardening

Building Community Through Gardens

By: Kelly McDonald

As part of my practicum, I developed a database and affiliate garden map for use internally and on the website. I also contacted and communicated with community garden coordinators to conduct a needs assessment.

One major public health issue addressed by Urban Harvest is food security. Many of the gardeners rely on the garden for food. Urban Harvest also supports donation gardens feeding the hungry in the Houston area.

Public Health Significance

The Public Health Essential Services that most closely relate to my practicum experience are (1) to develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts and (2) to mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems.

(1) The data that I’ve collected and the recommendations I provide will be used to create programs and policies to support individual and community efforts to increase access to healthy food and to feed the hungry.

(2) One of the main goals of the data I’ve collected is to maintain active records on community gardens and garden coordinators, so as to facilitate community partnerships to solve community garden issues. We are planning a program that would bring community garden coordinators together to discuss issues of community building and maintaining community within the garden.

My final project summarizes my findings from data collection and interviews. Through my research I’ve found:

- In 2012 Urban Harvest Gardens donated more than 38,000 pounds of produce.
- The biggest issues facing community gardens are creating a community and maintaining an active volunteer base.

Lessons Learned

- One important thing to keep in mind when starting your practicum is that all projects take time and organizations (and gardens) don’t always follow your timetable!
Outreach to Increase Austin’s Mother-Friendly Worksites

By: HEATHER NOBLE

Returning to work remains a major barrier to breastfeeding, but the City of Austin’s Chronic Disease Prevention and Control Unit (CDPC) is working to change that. Their Community Transformation Grant (CTG) requires an increase in Mother-Friendly worksites in Austin from 1 to 26 by September 2015.

As a CDPC intern, my role was to identify and support outreach opportunities with local businesses. I researched and drafted policy templates, compiled over 200 companies’ contact information, and have made initial calls to several dozen organizations.

Austin Steeves and Linda Terry, at CDPC, will continue this work by following up with interested businesses over the next few months. Through CTG, they will provide the free technical support these organizations need to implement lactation-supportive policies and become designated Mother-Friendly by the State of Texas.

Public Health Significance

This practicum touched on several of the Essential Services of Public Health.

Inform, educate, and empower:
- CDPC emphasizes education – contacting local businesses to assess and improve knowledge of existing regulations and the benefits of workplace health promotion.

Mobilize community partnerships:
- On this grant and others, CDPC collaborates with a number of local coalitions and trade organizations.

Develop policies and plans:
- While federal and state-level policies already exist, CDPC is helping businesses translate these to fit local and industry operations.

Enforce laws and regulations:
- Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, non-exempt female employees are guaranteed breaks and private space for lactation for up to one year following childbirth. First and foremost, this practicum was to increase FLSA compliance.
End-of-life Video Conversations

Practicum Highlights

- Developed innovative approach to end-of-life communication between patients, families, and healthcare providers
- Launched collaborative, multidisciplinary research group to conduct ongoing research on end-of-life communication

Advice for Future Practicum Students

- Think big! Don’t limit yourself to the listed practicum opportunities. I created my practicum based on my own interests and previous interactions with the leadership at my practicum site. We developed a project together that we now expect to become long-term grant-supported research.

Using Technology to Improve Patient-Doctor Communication about End-of-Life Preferences

The goal of my practicum at the MD Anderson Institute for Cancer Care Innovation was to develop web-based materials to encourage patient communication with their loved ones and providers about their preferences for end-of-life care. After the practicum began, we refined the idea to focus on crafting a protocol for encouraging patients to record short videos about what matters most to them, in life and in death.

By speaking with many of the doctors and nurses on the Critical Care service, we learned that patients often end up in the ICU without clearly expressing their wishes, leaving family members unsure or conflicted about what to do, when the patient can no longer speak for herself. These providers felt that a video recording in which the patient explained her wishes would be an invaluable resource in these unfortunately common circumstances.

Public Health Significance

My practicum focused on informing, educating, and empowering people about health issues. This essential public health service helps patients, their loved ones, and their providers to avoid unnecessary confusion, regret, prolonged suffering, and excess health care costs by improving their ability to communicate about end-of-life preferences.

By creating a set of prompts that help patients record short videos about what matters most to them, my practicum has helped empower patients to get the care they need, avoid unwanted escalation of care, and clearly communicate to their families and providers about how they want to spend their last days of life. By recording a video that they can use as a conversation starter, patients can overcome some of the emotional barriers to talking about this difficult subject.

Improving end-of-life communication will improve quality of life for every living person, as we all eventually face this issue in our personal lives.

70% of Americans want to die at home, but less than 30% do. (Bisognano & Goodman, 2013)

Image source: Anthony Russo for The Boston Globe

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(Bisognano & Goodman, 2013)

Image source: Anthony Russo for The Boston Globe
Public Health Department Accreditation and Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)

Public Health Communication & Strategic Partnerships

By: Sloan Skinner

The Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department (ATCHHSD) is seeking accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB). I worked to research and coordinate internal and external public health communication efforts, and specifically to contribute to accreditation and the CHIP.

The CHIP has four main target areas: access to healthy food, transportation, obesity prevention (and physical activity), and access to primary care. ATCHHSD is working with many community partners (i.e. Sustainable Food Center, Central Health, St. David’s, etc.) to achieve specific, identified, health improvement outcomes. The CHIP was in beginning phase of implementation, so much of my work included researching best practices and suggesting policies for community engagement, partner communication, and monitoring and evaluating progress (all of which are required by the PHAB). My experience culminated in planning, promoting, and implementing two community forums to disseminate information about CHIP efforts.

Public Health Significance

The ATCHHSD takes part in each of the ten essential public health services through its many focus areas, projects, and implementation of evidence-based public health efforts in the community. My research on internal and external communication supports efforts to develop communication policies and plans as well as to inform, educate and empower people about health issues.

I participated in conference calls with the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and other health departments seeking PHAB accreditation, to discuss strategies for evaluating and monitoring CHIP implementation and progress. Since ATCHHSD is working with so many community organizations, strategies include mobilizing community partnerships and encouraging partners to use established evaluation measures and reporting tools.

My final project was to plan, promote, and carry out two CHIP community forums. The goal was to inform, educate, and empower community members to take advantage of CHIP efforts to improve their health.

Special events/duties during your practicum

- Pre-Juneteenth Education & Wellness Fair at Blackland Neighborhood Center
- CHIP summit among all ATCHHSD community partners to set specific goals & action steps
- Two community forums, one in South Austin and one in North Austin, to disseminate information about CHIP efforts and encourage community members’ participation.

Lessons Learned [OR] Advice for Future Students

- Make every effort to connect with people from various organizations and on different projects, so you can glean what types of things you may (or may not) want to work on post graduation
- Sit in on any meetings or events available.

A women gets a free health screening at an education and wellness fair at Blackland Community Clinic in East Austin.

Photo from ATCHHSD Facebook page
For more information regarding The University of Texas School of Public Health, Office of Public Health Practice and the practicum program, please visit:

https://sph.uth.tmc.edu/practicum/