Editor’s Note: The National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHIP) is a paid internship opportunity that links environmental health undergraduate and graduate students with funded internship placements at qualified state, tribal, local, and territorial environmental public health agencies. This workforce initiative supports the establishment of qualified applicant pipelines to help meet current and future environmental health professional workforce needs across the nation. NEPHIP is supported by the National Center for Environmental Health within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through a cooperative agreement (CDC-RFA-OT18-1802).

We are pleased to offer a new column in the Journal that shines a spotlight on the project work being done by NEPHIP interns within their host agencies. Through these columns, we hope to highlight the value and importance of practice-based internships for students and environmental public health agencies, as well as share ideas and information relevant to the profession. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA, the host agencies, or the funders of the program.

Tyler Zimmerman was a NEPHIP intern during summer 2022 and completed his internship with the Office of Public Health Preparedness–Pee Dee Region within the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to participate in the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHIP), a prestigious initiative by the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). Despite the challenges posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, NEPHIP adapted its format to offer a remote internship experience. Through my placement with the Office of Public Health Preparedness–Pee Dee Region within the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SC DHEC), I delved into the world of environmental health, expanded my knowledge, and honed my skills. Although lacking the fieldwork aspect, NEPHIP exceeded my expectations and provided me with valuable project work and industry exposure.

Transitioning to a Virtual Internship

NEHA and SC DHEC seamlessly transitioned the internship program into a fully remote format. Although I missed out on the hands-on experience of fieldwork, the support provided was exceptional. My liaison, Mary Ramirez, diligently arranged virtual agency meetings on diverse topics that allowed me to gain industry insights. Additionally, my project supervisor, Mark Hendrix, devoted time each week to address any challenges I encountered during my internship. The welcoming and supportive nature of the public health preparedness team helped me find my place within the bureau, fostering a productive environment.

Exploring the Pee Dee Region: A Study in Socioeconomic Contrasts

The Pee Dee Region—consisting of Chesterfield, Clarendon, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Georgetown, Horry, Lee, Marion, Marlboro, Sumter, and Williamsburg counties—stretches across the northeastern quadrant of South Carolina. While the region is home to Myrtle Beach, the popular tourist destination, it also faces significant socioeconomic challenges. With 6 of the top 14 poorest counties in South Carolina, the Pee Dee Region exhibits a unique social demographic, highlighted by an immense wealth gap. These disparities underscore the need for comprehensive public health preparedness strategies in the region.

Developing a Strategic Evaluation System

During my internship, my primary project revolved around researching and identifying key factors that impact the day-to-day operation of medical needs shelters within the Pee Dee Region. Leveraging the Pee Dee Public Health Preparedness Bureau’s online database, I collated information and synthesized it into a comprehensive evaluation system for improving medical needs shelters: A Transformative Environmental Health Internship Experience.
system. This system aimed to strategically score medical needs shelters on multiple operational factors, such as proximity to the shoreline, capacity, staffing requirements, access to emergency departments, evacuation routes, feeding options, past hurricane damage, and the social vulnerability index score of the surrounding county. By eliminating potential biases inherent in the current rating system, this tool could assist the Pee Dee Public Health Preparedness Team in assigning numerical scores that represent the strategic value of each medical needs shelter.

**Immersing in Environmental Health: Igniting Passion for Equitable Practices**

My internship experience sparked a profound passion within me for the fields of emergency preparedness and risk assessment. The process of developing the evaluation tool not only captured my interest but also ignited a deep sense of purpose. I became truly passionate about making a significant impact by improving the evaluation tools available for medical needs shelters, knowing that my contributions could positively transform the lives of vulnerable individuals in the Pee Dee Region.

I became acutely aware of the critical role that equitable practices play in safeguarding communities, particularly those facing disproportionate environmental risks and hazards. The opportunity to be involved in a project that aims to eliminate biases in the current rating system further fueled my drive to ensure fairness and justice in healthcare provision.

Moreover, I found myself fully engaged in exploring the complexities of environmental public health principles, health equity models, and mass care and emergency management concepts. This comprehensive understanding deepened my commitment to finding innovative solutions and strategies to address environmental health challenges not only within medical needs shelters but also on a broader scale.

Working on this project enabled me to create real and meaningful impacts on individual lives, while also deepening my understanding of the intricate relationship between environmental health and public health. It fueled my drive to advocate for equity and inclusivity in healthcare, and this unwavering dedication continues to motivate me as I pursue a career focused on enhancing community well-being and fostering a healthier, more sustainable future.

**The Leadership Report: A Showcase of Learned Skills and Accomplishments**

To culminate my internship, I prepared and delivered a leadership report that showcased my project and its potential implications. This experience pushed me to enhance my presentation, communication, and education skills, which allowed me to effectively convey the significance of my work. The report garnered interest from senior leadership who expressed enthusiasm for implementing and expanding my project within their respective departments. Mark Hendrix, director of the Office of Public Health Preparedness–Pee Dee Region, commended the project, stating, “Thanks to this project, our agency now has a means to evaluate sites that have been chosen based on a framework of inclusion and access to potentially vulnerable communities during hurricanes and flooding events. We are continuing to use this to evaluate new sites and adopting this concept to our medical countermeasures planning for old and new sites.”

This recognition from senior leadership affirmed the significance of my efforts and provided me with a sense of accomplishment and motivation to continue pursuing my passion for creating positive change in the field of environmental public health.

**Reflecting on a Transformative Internship: A Road Map for Future Aspirations**

Reflecting on my internship, I am overwhelmingly satisfied with the opportunities it presented. Despite the limitations imposed by the remote format, I was fully immersed in my project and the work it entailed. Moreover, being paired with a health department outside my home state broadened my perspective and exposed me to unique regional challenges. While the absence of in-person engagement was regrettable, the skills and experience I gained from this internship have significantly prepared me for a future career in the environmental health profession. As I embark on the final year of my degree and prepare for subsequent employment, the invaluable lessons from NEHIP will undoubtedly guide my path.

**The Power of a Robust Internship Experience: The Lasting Influence of NEHIP**

NEHIP offered an exceptional experience, even in the face of the virtual limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through my placement, I was able to delve into the complexities of environmental health, develop a strategic evaluation system, and refine my skills. The supportive network and valuable insights gained from this internship have shaped my understanding of the environmental health industry, preparing me for future challenges and endeavors. While virtual, NEHIP served as a transformative stepping stone toward a career dedicated to safeguarding public well-being.

**About the Author:** Tyler Zimmerman is a senior at Central Michigan University majoring in environmental health and safety and minoring in leadership. He was a NEHIP intern during summer 2022 and completed his internship with the Office of Public Health Preparedness–Pee Dee Region within the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control. He is a Leader Advancement Scholar, student body president of Central Michigan University, and recipient of the 2023 Future Alumni Leader Award. Zimmerman is currently employed as an environmental compliance assistant with the Department of Risk Management, Environmental Health, and Safety at Central Michigan University. He will graduate with his bachelor of science in 2024.

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**Did You Know?**

October 12 is Children’s Environmental Health Day. The Children’s Environmental Health Network established the observance to increase the visibility of children’s environmental health issues and empower action. Learn more at https://cehday.org.