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**Texas Department of State
Health Services**

How One Office Utilized Interns to Support Texas' Pandemic Response and Build A Workforce Pipeline

By Sarah Hamill

The Office of Practice and Learning manages the DSHS Internships—one of many programs that help build the public health workforce. The goal of the Internship Program is to give current undergraduate and graduate college students hands-on experience to enrich their academic studies and a glimpse into life as a DSHS employee.

Shannon Richter and her Analytics and Information Management team in Regional and Local Health Operations (RLHO AIM) regularly hosts interns. Throughout the heat of the pandemic, their interns worked directly with the COVID-19 Vulnerable Populations and Facilities Taskforce. This experience was particularly valuable for Kourtney Lopez, Luke Pickerill, Kristen Sanchez, and Edward Yi as they all secured positions following their graduation.

Kristen and Luke both were hired by the RLHO AIM team. Kourtney is an Epidemiologist with the Healthcare Associated Infection Quality Assurance program. Edward is an Epidemiologist with Public Health Region 7.

Shannon largely attributes the retention of her interns to the level of work they were asked to complete. She shared, “for them to be able to handle real [COVID-19] data, doing analysis and seeing the impact of their work... made it a very meaningful experience.” Interns received and cleaned raw data on statewide COVID-19 cases as well as the conducted quality control.

Kristen completed an independent research project during her time with DSHS. Inspired by her work with the COVID-19 dashboard, she conducted a descriptive analysis on mortality and morbidity rates across the state in high-risk settings like jails and nursing homes. She credits the quality of her experience both to her supervisor Richter, and in part to her own initiative, setting up meetings with AIM team members and completing trainings on data analysis. Both Kristen and

Kourtney recall how open and encouraging the AIM team was to them exploring their own projects and interests throughout the internship program.

DSHS interns are encouraged to seek out their own opportunities throughout their time with the program. Edward felt like each staff member valued his contributions and empowered him to ask questions, build relationships, and become an equal member of the team.

Within the AIM team, interns were also given a great deal of support to compliment this sense of independence. Luke describes the team atmosphere as "intentional" in ensuring that they received a clear picture of what it looks like to be a full-time employee. In their final one-on-one, interns and their supervisor would discuss tips on applying to and interviewing for jobs with the agency to increase their chances of being hired following graduation.

Shannon and her former interns offered words of advice on how to get the most out of the DSHS internship experience.

- Apply for internship positions that interest you, not just one that might satisfy a credit requirement.
- Be proactive in building relationships - most people are happy to take time out of their day to meet students.
- Trust that you are there for a reason, and that the people around you want you to excel.

For the Summer 2023 semester, DSHS is bringing on its largest intern cohort ever with 49 interns working across the agency. If you have any questions or want more information about the DSHS Internship Program, email internships@dshs.texas.gov.