

## **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 very first PHAP host site in Illinois and has been a host site for associates since 2011.

The Clay County Health Department has been very successful in hosting Public Health Associates and the Public Health Associates we've hosted have been very successful.

Following are profiles on five of them.

**Read about Clay County's PHAP graduates on the following pages:**

---



**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. 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 Northern California to be closer to family, and in November 2013, I accepted a position at the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) as the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Coordinator. I took internal promotions within SFDPH and worked on an array of public health projects, including lean/quality improvement, adult use cannabis policy, hospital compliance, local policy development, and emergency activations. I am currently a Senior Technical Writer at the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), supporting the CDPH Director and State Public Health Officer.

I've had so many great memories at CCHD, it's hard to pick a favorite! 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 deployment to the Town of Paradise Emergency Operations Center for the 2018 Camp Fire (wildfire) response and as Deputy Planning Chief and Community Vaccine Access Strategy Lead for the SFDPH's COVID-19 response.

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: Be open, be humble, and be curious. I grew up in the SF Bay Area and never imagined myself re-locating to the rural Midwest, but I'm glad I did. CCHD provided me with a strong foundation to jump-start my public health career by offering incredible professional development opportunities and allowing 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.

I'm now a resident in internal medicine and am interested in infectious disease and global health.

During my first year at CCHD, 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). Since my main interest in public health was in infectious diseases, the CCHD Administrator helped me find relevant opportunities I was excited about, such as helping develop the health departments program for reportable diseases and attending conferences related to ID.. 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. After finishing PHAP in 2015, I completed my MPH at Johns Hopkins, followed by a fellowship with Global Health Corps as a Policy and Advocacy Associate in Brooklyn. I then completed medical school at UCSF and am now an internal medicine resident at UCLA. After residency, I plan to pursue a career in infectious disease and/or public health and epidemiology.

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, what trainings I could attend, and encouragement to discover my interests... My time at CCHD played a meaningful role in my career path to medicine and my continued passion for public health.

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: When I was assigned to a rural health department, I was nervous for the move. 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 choose CCHD. I made great friends and learned a lot (both professionally and personally) and still look back on it as one of my most meaningful experiences. In hindsight, 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 from the PHAP program in October 2016, I have completed an MPH/MBA degree at Benedictine University and returned to Minnesota to pursue a career in healthcare management. As the Community Health Director at Essentia Health, I am responsible for developing strategic initiatives and partnerships aimed at enhancing health and vitality within our communities. My team focuses on community outreach activities, addressing health equity issues, strategically investing community benefit funds, conducting Community Health Needs Assessments for our 13 hospitals, and leading community-wide health improvement strategies. Additionally, I oversee a Community Health Worker program that operates in primary care clinics across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Dakota.

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 program evaluation made me a competitive applicant for many job opportunities.

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: Working as a PHAP in a rural community offers several significant benefits. The staff are often generalists with many years of experience in the community, providing a wealth of knowledge and support. There are numerous opportunities to contribute meaningfully and engage deeply with the community. Moreover, stepping completely out of your comfort zone in this setting is a unique and invaluable experience. This is a great opportunity to jumpstart your public health career!

---



**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, now Senior Preparedness Field Assignee, in the Division of State and Local Readiness, Office of Readiness and Response. My host site is the Utah Department of Health and Human Services 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 role, I serve as the program deputy and oversee the coordination of the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) Cooperative Agreement for Utah from the grant application to the sub-awards and everything in between. I get to work collaboratively with the state and the local health districts on the PHEP program. I've been able to respond to various disease outbreaks such as the e-cigarette or vaping associated lung injury (EVALI), COVID-19, highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) and mpox. I believe my experience with CCHD has allowed me to continue my career in public health preparedness as environmental health is closely related. I am also able to build relationships with our local health department partners because I have been in a small, rural health department and understand where they are coming from. In addition, I was able to get my Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential as a result of my experience with CCHD.

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. I searched for it on Google Maps and then kept zooming out to figure out where it was located. I had never lived east of Reno or in a rural area, so moving out to Flora was a huge change. In addition, I had never imagined I would be working in Environmental Health. I took a few classes, but 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.

---



**Katie (CCHD PHAP from 2022 – 2024)**

**Year 1 Assignment: Environmental Health**

**Year 2 Assignment: Environmental Health**

I'm originally from the south suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Before starting PHAP, I received my Bachelor of Arts in Biochemistry and Biology from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.

Prior to moving to Clay County, I had never lived in a rural area before. It was a pretty big change for me, but I'm so glad I did it. Working at a rural local health department definitely offers the great opportunity and the flexibility to gain exposure to a wide variety of public health programs.

When I started at CCHD, my first few months were spent gaining familiarity with conducting inspections of retail food establishments. From there, I expanded to work on other Environmental Health (EH) activities like private sewage disposal system inspections, mosquito surveillance, and cottage food permitting, as well as non-EH activities in our Tobacco Prevention and Overdose Surveillance programs. In the summer of my first year, I also had the chance to start up two new EH programs at CCHD – Tick Surveillance and Residential Sharps Collection. The opportunity to start up both of these programs gave me valuable experience in grant writing & reporting, budgeting, and program implementation. Through our Tobacco Prevention program, I help conduct outreach and implementation of the CATCH My Breath anti-vaping program in schools across six counties. Additionally, I contributed to the creative development of two media campaigns and the content development for a new e-Learning course for our Illinois Tobacco Quitline Referral Partners. As part of local Overdose Surveillance, I create monthly overdose reports using hospital data and share these reports at Clay County's Health for Generations Coalition meetings.

Throughout my time at CCHD I've also gotten to assist with some Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) activities. After PHAP, I will continue working in preparedness with CDC as a Preparedness Field Assignee in the Office of Readiness and Response's Division of State and Local Readiness. My host site will be at the Illinois Department of Public Health in Springfield, Illinois. I'm excited to have the opportunity to incorporate the skills and perspective I've gained working at the local level into my work in this new position!

One of my favorite parts of working at CCHD has been the people. I've had so much support to grow personally and professionally in my time here – my supervisor Amber Wille and my coworkers have always looked out for me to find new opportunities or areas for growth to help make sure that I get as much as I can from this position (and to help make my experience a positive one). This position has given me great mentors that make this experience invaluable!

Words of wisdom to any incoming associates: Don't be afraid of change! When I started at CCHD, everything about this position was new for me – I hadn't ever considered working in Environmental Health before, had never lived in a rural area, and actually had pretty minimal experience working in public health. But, looking back I wouldn't change any of it! The opportunities I've had at CCHD have given me so much room to grow.

---