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PH 498

Final Report

Agency overview:

Portage County Health and Human Services is housed in the Ruth Gilfry building, named after the first county health nurse in Portage County, Ruth Gilfry (1906-1974). The building commemorates her work to improve the public health of Portage County area residents through a combination of advocacy and action, and still has her original desk and chair. Their vision is as follows; The Division of Public Health is recognized as a leader in making Portage County a safe, healthy, and vibrant place to live. Portage County Department of Health and Human Services promotes the health, safety, and well-being of Portage County residents. The Division of Public Health fulfills this mission by assessing the health of Portage County and responding with programs and policies that optimize the well-being of the community. The values are integrity, relationships, and excellence. The agency works towards their mission and values through their strategic planning goals:

Goal #1: Increase community awareness and understanding of public health services and the Division of Public Health.

Goal #2: Promote workforce development and capacity.

Goal #3: Increase stakeholder communication and collaboration.

Goal #4: Attain national accreditation via the Public Health Accreditation Board maintaining standards and objectives.

Involvement and activities:

Throughout my experience at Portage County Health and Human Services Division of Public Health, I was involved in many projects and different activities, and through these experiences, I utilized many of the NCHEC Areas of Responsibility. The competencies I applied daily were 6.1: Obtain and disseminate health-related information and 7.1: Identify, develop, and deliver messages using a variety of communication strategies, methods, and techniques. I shared COVID-19 case counts for the county and state, updated the numbers on the interactive dashboard, and shared other important information about COVID-19 to the Facebook page in graphics, videos, and planning different social media campaigns. In addition to this, I applied competency 7.4: Promote the health education profession, through sharing information about Public Health as well as different programs that are available within the agency.

During my experience, Portage County Health and Human Services was able to host three different testing events which were open to the public and of no-charge. These drive-up testing events allowed me to assist the National Guard troops fill out paperwork for each individual being tested. I assisted the individuals with identifying their current and past symptoms, recording their contact information, understanding the testing process, and agreeing to consent of testing. Following the testing, I organized and analyzed the patient information and test results for the county and utilized competencies 4.4: Collect and manage data and 4.5: Analyze data. Through contact tracing between my other job duties, I was able to exercise competency 6.3: Provide advice and consultation on health education/promotion. During each phone call, I shared information about COVID-19, answered questions, and provided information on how to quarantine and self-isolate.

Outside of COVID-19 work, I worked with different coalitions such as AODA Coalition, Healthy Weight Coalition, and Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Coalition. I collaborated with people from different agencies within Portage County as well as different departments in surrounding counties. Together, we worked on different projects to fulfill the priorities and goals established by the coalitions. I have also had the opportunity to attend many informational webinars, such as an entire series by APHA on advancing racial equity, and to be certified as a Mental Health First Aider.

Halfway into my preceptorship, I was offered a full-time job as LTE Community Health Planner. In this limited term position, I have continued my previous work and added on new duties, such as serving on the Public Information Officer team for the Incident Command System responding to COVID-19 in Portage County. In this role, I will also utilize competencies 2.2: Develop goals and objectives and 2.4: Develop a plan for delivery of Health Education/promotion, while assisting in the Community Health Improvement Plan for 2020-2025 and being involved in planning sessions for the upcoming year.

Overall, my work was very rewarding. I learned a lot of different facets that exist within the Public Health world, especially within government. I was able to experience how the county works when responding to an emergency and was very excited to see the collaboration that happened within the community to work against COVID-19 for months on end. As far as evaluating my own activities, I think I did well. Being offered a position halfway through my experience assured me that my work had not gone unnoticed. As I continue my time in this position, I have continued to gain experience and have been asked to take on more duties. I look forward to continuing to serve this organization and this community and learning more throughout this opportunity.

Engagement with diverse populations:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to work in the ways I normally would with the public. Unfortunately, many of the in-person activities were either canceled or postponed for a later date in the future when COVID-19 is not an eminent threat. One way that I was able to engage with diverse populations was through WING COVID-19 testing. Through these events, I interacted with many people including both the National Guard troops as well as community members. Anyone over the age of five could be tested, so through the experience I worked with people of many age groups, ethnicities, and even languages (with the help of interpreters). Aside from this project, I was unable to work directly with community members, but a lot of my daily work involved meeting with people of many ages.

Recommendations:

Although I do not think I got a full picture experience of how services work when things are full swing, I do have some recommendations for the agency. Growing up here, I did experience very little diversity. I grew up with mostly white classmates, but times are changing. In the last year, I have noticed more people of color in the area, but still very few people of color working within the agency. I can imagine that it would be uncomfortable to receive care as a person of color from someone who does not look like you or understand your culture and experiences. I think it would be very beneficial to gain some diversity within the organization, or to implement diversity training or cultural competency training. Racism is a Public Health issue and I do not feel that it is an issue that is being addressed on a daily basis here. COVID-19 truly unveiled a lot of the disparities within the healthcare system that we, in Public Health, know exist. I felt that this is a paramount time to share the data we have and to educate people on this important topic. Too often, I felt that we tip-toed around issues in our public statements for fear

of backlash from the community. Although we serve the community, it is our job to educate them and sometimes learning can be uncomfortable. I want to see more community collaboration, more discussion about underserved populations and how we can do better, and more engagement with the community overall.

Regarding recommendations for improvement of the external agency operations, a lot can be done. First and foremost, I was shocked to see the lack of empathy in the priority population of the agency; the Portage County community. Every day that I logged into Facebook, there was a new nasty comment from someone who was overall ignorant to what Public Health is and does. It seemed that people either thought the health department was doing too much or too little and that no one would be happy with the work being done. Although it is our job to educate people on what Public Health is, I felt that my efforts often fell onto deaf ears. The entire situation of COVID-19 has been extremely politicized, and it has resulted in our work being that much more challenging and sometimes even feeling impossible. This reality check has helped me to understand why it is so important to practice Area VII: Communicate, Promote, and Advocate for Health, Health Education/Promotion, and the Profession. Although there may now be a bad wrap on Public Health because of COVID-19, we have to work even harder to show people the work that is really done in the Public Health world.

Conclusion:

Overall, this has been a very educational experience. Joining the Public Health workforce amidst a pandemic has been very challenging, but also rewarding. The COVID-19 pandemic has truly highlighted the importance of Public Health across the globe. I think this situation allowed me to showcase all the skills I developed while studying Public Health at UW-La Crosse, as well as having minors in Digital Media Studies and Design and Women's studies. My coursework

prepared me for daily work within this position, and the position allowed me to develop even stronger skills in Public Health and my other areas of experience. I am extremely grateful that Portage County Health and Human Services offered me the opportunity to complete my preceptorship and to then offer me a position onboard during this uncertain time. Although I know it will continue to be an uphill battle against COVID-19, I am looking forward to the upcoming projects and experiences I will be involved in. Working for Portage County Health and Human Services is allowing me the opportunity to sharpen my professional skills, while also understanding that I am new to the Public Health world. The adaptability of the department is challenging me to step out of my comfort zone and apply my skills in new roles and adapting to changes within the department and the community. As someone who has not officially graduated from undergrad, this is an experience that is so rare, and I am extremely excited to continue to sharpen my skills and to continue to learn and grow. Although the future is uncertain, especially with COVID-19, I know that this experience has forced me to grow as a Public Health professional and as a young adult.