

Alicia E. Alvarado, MPH Candidate

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Alicia E. Alvarado, a 2013 HSHPS/VA Fellow at the Veterans Benefits Administration in Honolulu, Hawaii, was active in multiple volunteer opportunities and held a variety of leadership positions before she began her summer of training with HSHPS: Fundraising Officer for the School of Community & Global Health Student Association (SCGHS) at Claremont Graduate University, Group Leader at Planned Parenthood of Orange & San Bernardino Counties' Young Women's Health Conference, and active member and organizer for the Latino Graduate Student Association at CGU. When she returned from Hawaii, she was promoted from Data Collector to School Recruiter for Healthy Habits, a research project led by Dr. Kim Reynolds that focuses on the habitual and neurocognitive processes in adolescent obesity prevention, particularly in Latino adolescents. This month, she attended the 2014 Latina Research Conference: Increasing the Pipeline for Future Scholars on a conference travel award from the Latina Researchers Conference.

Her drive is apparent and comes from a personal place: "I am motivated by a deep personal connection to my subject area because my mother was a poor teenager on welfare with less than a high school education when I was born. I witnessed firsthand the struggles she, and my extended family endured and continue to endure, in attempting to access resources vital to our survival. My family her/his-story has inspired me to strive to be an advocate for Latino men and women's health and to help men and women who are exactly like her."

What was your experience like at the Veterans Benefits Administration in Honolulu?

Our cohort participated in a three day orientation in Washington, D.C., where we were introduced to various Latino health issues, met with leaders in the public health field, and learned about the many future career possibilities available to us. Once we reached our destinations (some of us were placed at the VA, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Puerto Rico Cancer Center), we settled into our sites, met our supervisor, and got to work.

As an intern at my site, I worked with the Outreach Coordinator in the Public Contact Section of the Veterans Service Center. I was exposed to the wide and diverse society that operates within the veterans community, specifically minority populations (homeless, women, disabled, ethnic minorities, etc.). I was able to assist the regional office by providing recommendations and solutions towards serving these communities effectively and efficiently. I was granted the ability to work in the field most of the time and I was able to put theory to practice.

Throughout the summer, I also continued to engage in weekly seminars regarding Latino health,

networking, creating effective presentations, writing policy briefs, and how to conduct public health research. Most importantly, I was able to conduct my own original research at my site and present it to the staff and supervisors who I worked with over the summer. My project culminated into a qualitative research project titled *“VA Outreach Initiatives to Reach Out to Veteran Minority Populations in Hawaii.”*

What lessons did you take away from your HSHPS fellowship experience?

This experience has been one of the highlights of my graduate career because it has granted me the opportunity to develop professionally and academically. The HSHPS fellowship experience gave me the tools necessary to develop as a public health scientist and develop my research methods and skills. As a result of the requirements set forth by HSHPS from creating a policy brief, conducting original research, and polishing our resumes and CV's, my skills as an academic writer increased tenfold. The workshops and seminars, which we were required to attend, provided me the opportunity to learn how to network. I was able to learn and meet some of the best and brightest health professionals and graduate students, studying and working towards eliminating health disparities around the country.

What are you doing now? How are you applying the lessons learned during your HSHPS fellowship?

Serving as an HSHPS Fellow has led to other future professional opportunities for me. For example, during the orientation we were introduced to a Presidential Management Fellow (PMF) alum who relayed to us the importance and benefits of applying to a prestigious fellowship offered by the federal government. I applied and I was notified in December - to my surprise - that I was a semi-finalist. I have also continued to actively seek out and apply for other post-graduate fellowships with the VA and the County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services. I was also able to secure my current Public Health internship with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health as a result of my experience with HSHPS.

What are your career goals? Did these goals change after your HSHPS experience?

After a period of five years working in the public health field, I plan to pursue a DrPH and continue to conduct research vital to the discourse on Latina/o health disparities. I am particularly interested in contributing to public policy through my research as I realize the importance that policy plays in making certain that our communities are healthier places to live.

I am highly confident that I have the ability to continue onwards in my journey towards becoming a leader in public health. HSHPS has taught me the importance of continually seeking out new avenues to increase my skill set, network, and seek mentorship in order to be successful and to help our Latino communities.

Where and what do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?

I am particularly interested in conducting community-based participatory research in the Latino community and creating collaborations with community members and stakeholders in order to improve Latino health outcomes. I would like to offer consultation services to community-based health organizations serving the Latino community and be an advocate for Latinos needing and seeking health services.

I am excited at the prospect of what lies ahead for me as a Latina health researcher. I highly recommend anyone who is dedicated to improving the health of Latinos and eradicating health disparities to apply for the HSHPS fellowship as it has opened many doors for me and I hope that it will do the same for you.