

Cecilia Alcala, MPH

2013, 2014 HSHPS/VA Fellow

HSHP/ US Department of Veteran Affairs Graduate Fellow - Environmental Programs Service



Cecilia Alcala, MPH, participated in the HSHPS Graduate Training Fellowship Program (GFTP) at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Health in Washington, D.C. during the summer of 2013. Under the supervision of Dr. Terra Irons, a toxicologist, she developed online and mobile content for various environmental exposures Veterans endure during service, and worked as a researcher and provided program support on various projects throughout the Veterans Health Administration. "Working with this prestigious organization [HSHPS] inspired my passion for aiding in the increase of Hispanic and Veterans' health disparities through research," said Cecilia.

Today, Cecilia is again an HSHPS/VA Fellow, this time working on a project for the Deputy Under Secretary for Health - Operations and Management, analyzing data from a survey that was given to network and medical directors from VA Medical Centers nationwide. This particular survey addressed scheduling, training, and administration issues that were brought to light in the wake of the recent media coverage focused on the VA administration.

How did you become interested in public health and Hispanic health issues?

Prior to attending my undergraduate institution, I always exhibited a passion for medicine and public health and believed that becoming a medical physician was the only way to impact the health of my community. However, through my previous personal and academic experiences, I unearthed a hidden passion for the field of public health and environmental and occupational health. Consequently, throughout my college education, I yearned for a sense of belonging within a field that could merge and cultivate my passion for chemistry, psychology, sociology, mathematics, and helping others around the world.

As a daughter of Haitian and Trinidadian immigrants, I have always had a passion for understanding and researching the health issues of underserved populations in my hometown of Brooklyn, New York. In review of my past experiences, interning with the Healthy Lifestyles Coordinator at the Bedford Stuyvesant YMCA in Brooklyn, New York, was my first encounter working with children and families of an underserved population. My objective was to increase attendance and to develop and promote the Diabetes Prevention Program to the Hispanic population in the community. My duties entailed giving presentations at several community health fairs and recreation centers, and implementing programs in the community. After months of hard work, there was an increase in the communities' attendance, and the prevalence and incidence of diabetes from the Hispanic population has since decreased. This experience reinforced my passion for pursuing public health research and working with underserved populations, specifically the Hispanic and Haitian populations. It inspired my desire to pursue a career in public health and to serve underserved populations through health education and prevention programs focused on both environmental, and maternal and child health.

Can you describe a time during your HSHPS internship that stuck out to you?

A memorable moment that stuck to me was when a fellow intern and I were scheduled to go to a meeting with the Deputy Under Secretary for Health - Operations and Management (DUSHOM) about a project he wanted us to do. However, on the day of the meeting it was cancelled and we were on standby for a meeting the entire week. As the week passed us by, we thought maybe his office might have forgotten about us. But his office called us for a meeting within 30 minutes a few days later. Every day, I had made sure that I was dressed appropriately just in case we would have a meeting with him last minute.

When that happened, I remembered Ms. Quinteros [Michelle Quinteros de Czifra, HSHPS Executive Director] telling us during orientation that you should be prepared for anything at all times. Her advice definitely resonated with me and I was indeed prepared for the meeting at such short notice. Thank you Ms. Quinteros!

How has the program helped you move forward in your career?

The HSHPS Graduate Fellowship Program has given me the skills, experience, knowledge and confidence that I need in order to move forward in my public health career. It has aided in expanding my knowledge of occupational health and to serve the Hispanic population effectively, as well as give me an experience of a lifetime.

Where do you see yourself and your career going from here?

In the fall, I will begin a fellowship at the US Environmental Protection Agency as an ASPPH/EPA Fellow in Washington, DC, for a year. In the future, I hope to receive a doctorate in osteopathic medicine and to work at a public health organization to develop both research and prevention programs that address environmental exposures that affect maternal and child health and safe sanitation practices and development in underserved populations, specifically the Haitian and Hispanic population.

What advice can you give to young people who may have an interest in Hispanic health or medicine/public health/health professions but are unsure of pursuing the field?

Believe in yourself. Take risks on your future. Follow your heart and your dreams. Network with your professors, fellow students/ colleagues, and with people in the field of your interest. Always look for ways to gain new skills and experiences. Write your goal/aim on a sheet of paper and put it somewhere where you can see it every day - this will serve as a reminder for you to work towards your goal throughout the day.