

United States Department of Agriculture- Rural Development

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Executive Summary

Having the privilege to intern for United States Department of Agriculture- Rural Development in Imperial, CA helped me develop very important skills that I will use throughout my career. During my sophomore year, I decided to apply for an internship for USDA Rural Development's Water and Environmental Program in the Imperial Valley. After being selected, I had to take on the challenge of working, attending SDSU full time, and completing my hours as an intern. As an intern at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) – Rural Development, I got further exposed on how the government strives to help improve the economy and quality of life in rural America. All the work that is carried out is done so with the objective of benefiting rural communities, which is something I am very passionate about.

Living my whole life in the Imperial Valley, it surprised me to learn about the great needs there are in the area, ranging from housing assistance to water and sewage needs. As an intern, I had the opportunity to visit towns in Southern California where basic needs, such as water and sewage, were in some period of time not available to them. However, thanks to the efforts of the USDA, these communities now have access to these essential services and their quality of life has improved. This internship experience, made me realize of how fortunate I am to have the basic needs for health and sanitation. We sometimes take these simple things for granted, but there are people who struggle to have access to these services. My supervisors at USDA- RD, are very knowledgeable and educated me immensely on the process it takes for all these project to be possible. From helping USDA-RD staff, I got to see first-hand the hard work and dedication it takes to provide assistance, such as water treatment and sewer system loans.

During my tenure with USDA-RD I assisted with an array of duties, including, preparation and organization of loan documents for water and sewer systems, housing, and community

facilities. I was primarily tasked with maintaining these files in working order and assisted with preparation of loan processing, servicing and closing documents, and reviewing of loan applications for completeness and conformance with agency regulations. Furthermore, I became the first line of customer service for USDA-RD, as I assisted with walk-in customers- and answering telephone inquiries. All these duties helped me develop people skills and organizational skills.

I hope to one day be part of the United States Department of Agriculture and get to help rural communities, like the town I live in. I hope to be able to make a difference in people's lives by providing them my services. I have had the wonderful opportunity, which I am extremely thankful for, of being part of USDA- Rural Development in Imperial, CA, where I got to see the difference USDA employees make in communities and in personal life's. I look up to them and want to one day be able to give back to rural communities like they do.

Project Objectives:

When I began my internship, what I imagined I would be doing was simply helping customers with an application, in order to get funds for their projects. As time progressed in my internship, I realized staff and myself had to do more in order to make those projects possible. It wasn't just a simple application that we had to work on. There were specific documents needed such as letter of condition, letter of intent to meet conditions, request of obligation of funds, and many other documents. In order to receive these documents in the correct format, it was necessary to meet with borrowers to explain to them the importance of these documents and how to complete them. I had the opportunity to go with a specialist to sites, in order to meet with borrowers and talk about these subjects. All of this took time, therefore when I worked on the application files I understood that this was not an easy and fast process. Applications could not be send to State Office, to be obligated until we made sure all applications were properly completed. I see many potential careers with United States Department of Agriculture. The ones that interested me the most were the ones I was exposed to during my internship period. The specialists explained to me the process it takes to make all the projects possible and I was amazed on the tremendous difference this projects make in rural communities. Being able to help staff with necessary steps to make the projects possible, allowed me to know that putting hard work and dedication to make these water, wastewater, health care, education, and public safety projects possible was something I liked doing and was a potential career. My original goal for this project was to learn how the federal work environment was. As time progressed during my internship, I not only wanted to learn about the environment, but wanted to develop the necessary traits to become an excellent worker. I also learned that there was more to just simply working on an application, but being able to communicate with the borrowers, being able to help them with the application process, and

providing great customer service. I had the greatest role models to learn from, the specialist in
USDA- RD.

Project Approach

The methods I took to achieve my goals and tasks was always being prepared and aware of what was happening. It included asking the necessary questions, in order to make sure I was doing my assignments correctly. I was exposed to a lot of new information; there I always took notes on this to be able to be familiar with the vocabulary used or to simply understand what was going on. When I was being told by a specialist how to do an assignment, I would take notes on that too, so that when I was actually doing it I could easily go back and see the steps. I was working on several applications at the same time, therefore I believe that being organized was a very important skill. What helped me keep track of very document for every different application was labeling them. When specialists gave me my assigned duties or the things I had to work on, I would make them into To-Do Lists. This helped me a lot because I didn't want to turn in my assignments and have a missing part. It was also very helpful knowing what I had already completed and what was pending for the following day. Towards the end of my internship, I was given a great suggestion from a specialist. The idea he gave me was pertaining to keeping record of all projects, meetings, site visits, etc in the workplace. I found this very helpful because I sometimes tend to forget about things I do, so having this record will definitely improve me in my personal and professional life. Overall, I think that it is very important during an internship to ask questions when in doubt if you are doing a project the correct way. All the specialist I worked with were happy to answer my questions and help me with my duties.

Project Outcomes

Being selected to intern for USDA- Rural Development gave me very important skills that can be used in many careers. During my internship, I got to job shadow area specialist in different site visits. I participated in a Niland, CA visit, where we explained to the borrower the importance of the letter of condition and the process there is in order to obligate a project. I was also able to prepare application files for local school districts. I got the experience of servicing files by, inputting financial data into USDA's servicing system to ensure their financial sustainability, as well as assisting with insuring servicing files included audit reviews, security inspections, and compliance reviews and that they were in the correct files for each borrower. I was taught how to make sure projects were sustainable by making sure borrowers had adequate revenue to meet expenditures. I helped Multi- Family Housing specialist verify attendant program eligibility and assisted clients with filling out Pre-Qualification Forms for Single Family Housing Program. I also got to work with the processing of grants by preparing project files for community facility project and water/environmental programs. For example, I worked on the Computer Science Integration Equipment Project for School Districts.

I also had the honor to assist with the coordination of site visit in Coachella, CA for Under Secretary Lisa Mensah. During my internship period, I worked on loan and grant projects that totaled to more than 10 million dollars. I am honored to have been part of these project that will highly benefit communities. I had the privilege to visit community facilities and speak with the supervisor. She explained to us the great benefits that specific community facility in Coachella, CA has had. I am excited to visit in the near future the outcomes of these \$10 million projects. I was also part of ongoing construction projects for more than \$10 million.

Interning in all four programs, Community Facility, Water and Environmental, Multi-Family Housing, and Single Family Housing, demonstrated me the needs there are in my community. It also showed me the need there is for economic and community development, in order for communities to become more sustainable by creating businesses and jobs. I also learned about the significance and need there is for community facilities and subsidize housing in the Imperial County. One of the lessons I learned during my internship is that it takes a lot of work to make these loan, grants, and projects possible, but it is all worth it when you see the positive outcomes and the benefits they created for community member. I learned that it is very important to have customers service skills because when you work with clients you are giving them the first impression of USDA. Interning for the United States Department of Agriculture was a wonderful experience that helped me grow professionally and that has opened me other doors.

Conclusions

Being selected to intern for USDA- RD was a wonderful experience that taught me valuable skills and opened me other doors as well. I recently applied for USDA Rural Development's Student Intern position (GS-1199 – Grade 3) in Imperial, California and got selected. I believe if it had not been for my experience as an intern during 2016, this opportunity would have not been possible. My career goals are to provide services to people. I have been lucky to be in a position where I can give back to my community. A career with the USDA that interest me is Program Manager of Special Nutrition Programs; I believe that providing children and low-income people with access to food, a healthy diet, and nutrition education in a manner that supports American agriculture is a career that I would really enjoy. All the careers I was exposed to in USDA- RD in Imperial, CA also interest me. I want to continue my education by pursuing a Master's Degree in Public Administration or a Law Degree in Public Interest. My overall goal is to have a career where I know I am making a positive impact in people's life.

Appendices



SDSU-IVCampus' student selected for an internship within USDA-RD's Water and Environmental Program

USDA-HSI & SDSU-IVCampus Partnership

Rocio Ortiz, majoring in Public Administration with an interest in Sustainability, was selected for an internship within USDA-RD's Water and Environmental Program in the rural area of the Imperial Valley, California. The experiential learning experience in natural resource management, environmental science, and water-related conservation was made available via the CSU system Water Resources and Policy Initiatives in conjunction with the Water Resources Institute through the Water Resources Experiential Learning for USDA Careers, a funded project by the USDA-NIFA – HSI's Education Grants Program.

Rocio Ortiz is hosted at the USDA Service Center in Imperial, CA assisting to provide its rural communities with information on the technical assistance and financing necessary to develop drinking water and waste disposal systems, sanitary sewer, and storm drainage facilities; which is the only federal program exclusively focused on rural water and waste infrastructure needs of rural communities.