Interning with NRHA

I spent this past summer in Washington, D.C., and my internship was with The National Rural Health Association (NRHA). NRHA is a non-profit, non-partisan membership organization whose objective is to provide leadership on different rural health issues. The organization has over 20,000 members, all whom affiliate with one of NRHA’s many constituent groups. The National Rural Health Association utilizes its membership components to be the voice of the people, addressing the health problems many of the members see right at home. This summer the large focus was on rural hospital closures.

NRHA is headquartered in Leawood, Kansas right outside of Kansas City. NRHA’s membership services, communications, and finance teams work in Leawood, but D.C. is home to their government affairs and program services teams. I spent my internship working for both of these two teams, working with program services on planning and facilitating national meetings and with government affairs on pertinent legislation.

My ability to work with two different teams allowed me to develop applicable office skills and learn about both rural health and myself. Although my day-to-day consisted of several different tasks, my largest assignment while at NRHA was to draft a policy paper on chronic care which would become a formal policy position of NRHA. NRHA hopes to use my compilation of data and recommendations to drive change on Capitol Hill, especially with respects to rural America. NRHA will also send this paper to their government action constituency group for them to edit, add information where they see fit, and hopefully finally
approve at their next policy institute meeting. Once the group approves the paper, it is considered a formal policy position of NRHA.

Although I was always working on my policy paper over my time, I often undertook other tasks. For the government affairs team, I frequently drafted support letters for legislation and hearings, which helped me develop a different writing style than I am used to and a greater exposure to the health problems and how they apply to different parts of the rural population.

Another assignment I would take point on was the creation of infographics. Once NRHA highlights a new problem in rural America, they take lead on it and often create helpful “one pagers” for both their members and members of Congress. In order to avoid being too wordy with different statistics, these write ups would often include informational graphics. I would read the different statistics and facts and then consolidate them into an easily understandable graph or flow chart.

For the program services team, my tasks were a little different. My first job when I arrived was to update their webpage on State Rural Health Associations. This required extensive research to update names, contact information, and office locations. Then, I had to learn how to use their website editing software in order to change the actual pages. In addition to website updates, I was in charge of collecting RSVP’s for dates and hotel needs for their upcoming meetings in order to compile an attendee list for the meeting. The lists helped with conference room size and hotel room reservations. If the meeting was being held in DC, I would also attend and take notes on important topics discussed.
My experience taught me a lot about rural health, how to work in an office environment, and myself. My initial interest in pursuing an internship at NRHA directly stemmed from my time at Sewanee, in rural Tennessee. There was a lot I already knew about health problems in rural areas, but so much I never thought of as a problem. I learned a lot about hospital closures, border health, rural veterans’ health and different issues of primary care. The research I conducted and meetings I attended were very informative and gave me a wider understanding about the big health problems people face in rural America. I also grasped a better understanding of America’s health care system in general and how legislation is really pushed through Congress. In order to discuss and write about many of the health problems in rural America, it was necessary for me to understand the ins and outs of our healthcare system. My time with the government affairs team also taught me how people lobby for action in Congress. I was fortunate enough to be at NRHA at a time when they were drafting and introducing a bill, which expanded my knowledge on the process.

More importantly, NRHA has taught me about myself and where I would like to see my career go after I graduate. I have had the opportunity to work with some amazing, accomplished people who are so compassionate about their careers. Working here I have decided I want to work somewhere where I feel wholeheartedly about the mission of the organization or company. Although I do not know exactly what I want to do, I know I do not want to spend 9 am to 5 pm five days a week doing work for something I do not care about. Working in Washington D.C. has
also made me realize D.C. is definitely a city I would like to be located in after school. It is full of life and activities without being too claustrophobic or overbearing.

Overall, my time at NRHA has been astoundingly rewarding, and I would recommend it for others. I have learned so much but was still able to work freely. I'm extremely fortunate to have been able to receive funding through Sewanee’s Career and Leadership Development office in order to accept this opportunity. It's not always easy to forgo three months of pay in order to accept an unpaid internship but the funding allowed me to do this and learn more about what I want to do and where I want to be.