I had a highly informative and interesting experience interning with the Flathead City-County Health Department in and around the Flathead Valley, Montana. This ten-week, 400-hour internship was part of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA)’s NEPHIP internship program. Working with 9 environmental health professionals, and other health department administrators and staff, I learned the day to day functions of a county Environmental Health department and completed numerous projects with the guidance of the staff. The EH office was located in Kalispell, but the large county meant that I traveled to many different kinds of locations and communities throughout my work with them.

My work/time fell into a few main categories: Creating a set Healthy Homes materials for department staff to utilize in their public outreach, overhauls of department procedures, public outreach, complaint investigations, septic system-related tasks, data compilation and entry, accompanying sanitarians on field work, and form editing.

Though I couldn’t do my own inspections in any category but septic due to certification requirements, I spent much of my first few weeks following sanitarians on their fieldwork inspections and seeing the very diverse and interesting realities of environmental health field work.

My flagship project was, using Fort Collins Healthy Homes resources as a springboard, to create my own set of comprehensive resources for Flathead County citizens to address the health and safety of their homes. Some of the resources were already existent, such as those created by governmental organizations. Others I created myself when a resource did not yet exist with the form and content I desired. The final roster of resources includes:

- An introductory Healthy Home checklist created by the Surgeon General, including a section on child safety.
- A DIY home Asthma assessment to hunt around one’s home for potential asthma triggers and eliminate them.
- A Natural Home Cleaners Recipe Book to allow people to make their own non-toxic home cleaners for any purpose
I then worked with different members of the health department as a whole to figure out how these resources could be brought to the awareness of the public. The Women Infants Children (WIC) and Home Visiting nurses were particularly interested in the resources I had compiled.

After learning about the basics and regulations surrounding private septic systems, I was able to take some of the workload off of the overtasked EH sanitarians by conducting final septic inspections on my own. These are the last inspections and approvals that take place before the septic system is backfilled (buried) in the ground to continue operating, likely for many decades. I had the pleasure of working with many highly skilled and knowledgable septic installers that made this, so complicated, very straightforward and easy. I completed sketches of systems from a top view that included important measurements, distances from required setbacks (wells, property lines, etc.), GPS coordinates, and more.

I edited or created numerous forms that the EH department can utilize in their work. I created a new plan review form for would-be food manufacturers to fill out before they were approved. I improved a form for temporary non-profit food vendors, including extra key information. I put together a spreadsheet of old variances to regulations so that a newly promoted chief health officer could look pack at her predecessor’s approach to granting or denying variances to maintain a coherent approach from one person’s management to another’s. I created a flyer to be sent to schools in the county to make them aware of the risk of old chemicals piling up in their school labs and the businesses they can contact to gather, remove, and dispose of the chemicals. I created a brand-new study guide for septic system self-installers so that hunting through 150 pages of regulations for what they need to know to build their own system becomes much more straightforward and easy. I also overhauled the tests that self- and pro-
septic installers need to take before they can install systems to remove redundancy, improve diagrams, and ensure all important concepts were tested.

I sent out a notice and an explanation to all septic pumpers in the county requesting that they send their septage dumping data to the county so that we could develop a solution to insufficient dumping space in the county. Although I never received any related calls, I trained myself to be the “hotline” for possible calls about flooded home wells, to advise people not to approach their pumps (shock risk) or use the water from them (contamination risk) until they could clean their wells and have them professionally inspected. I also helped the EH staff by investigating complaints they didn’t have time to look into, driving into some remote and non-government-friendly areas to take pictures as evidence of complaint resolution or continued need to resolve.

I got a solid grounding in what it means to work for a health department, and got to tackle many of my own projects. I learned what it takes to communicate my ideas to others, put plans into action, and how to approach public interaction. I am grateful for the fantastic opportunities I had working in Flathead County.