

When I tell people that I am studying “public health,” they conjure images of petri dishes, COVID-19 testing, and free community health clinics. In the aftermath of the pandemic, people are uniquely aware of the importance of public health measures, but typically do not understand the pervasiveness of public health practice in every aspect of life. Usually, people are surprised to learn that my studies mainly consist of policy analysis, examination of law review articles, and reviewing population and survey data to understand the efficacy of interventions. I have chosen to focus my studies on a topic we learn early in public health curriculum: structural drivers of health. These are the root causes of the health disparities that exist in all of our communities; they typically take the form of law and policy, which shape our ability to access opportunity and consequently our ability to access health. This is why I have chosen to pursue my masters of public health with a health policy concentration at The George Washington University; afterward, I plan to attend law school where I will transform my knowledge, compassion, and legal expertise into a pursuit of equitable health outcomes through the law.

I grew up in a small, rural town in Pennsylvania where I witnessed the harsh realities of rural poverty. This population is burdened with poor educational attainment, food insecurity, substance abuse, and limited access to health services. As I grew older, I understood more about the structure of my school district, specifically how district lines were drawn in a way that continues to disadvantage my rural community. We do not have a single grocery store nor business (except a few pizza shops) within the boundaries of the school district, meaning we do not receive business tax revenue. In fact, all of the nearby large chains, businesses, and wealthy neighborhoods were drawn into the boundaries of the wealthy school district next door. I do not disparage my public school education, rather I admire the perseverance of the school teachers, faculty, and students alike. However, the reality is that the school is underfunded because of this

structural design, which is outside of the control of the individuals whose opportunities it limits: the students.

During my undergraduate education, I was awarded the Silver President's Volunteer Service Award for volunteering over 265 hours serving children in the community, both in Washington, D.C. (where I attend university) and at home in Pennsylvania. This service has been an excellent way for me to give back to my community, and attempt to mitigate some of the barriers low-income children face in attaining health. For two summers, I managed a free summer meals program for local children where I provided free healthy lunches alongside engaging health education activities. This was a great opportunity to connect parents to other resources available in the community—locations that accept WIC benefits, food banks, Medicaid enrollment support, etc. I was also able to design fun, educational activities to teach the children about different health topics. For example, we played interactive games about street safety, I created worksheets about sun safety, and nutrition education centered around the balanced lunches we served each day. Additionally, I had the opportunity to assist with LVHN's Weller Health Education programs, in which we visited elementary summer school programs to deliver age-appropriate presentations about sex education, nutrition, and bullying.

During the school year, I volunteered at a local elementary school tutoring students in reading literacy. In this role, I was able to assist children in developing their foundational reading skills, and create close mentorship bonds with young students facing challenges both inside and outside of the classroom. I view service as absolutely fundamental to my public health education, because I have developed compassion and understanding for the struggles my community faces. It is my hope that this service will ground me throughout my academic and professional career, ensuring the needs of the community drive my work.

Currently, I conduct research for my university on Medicaid, where I analyze current and proposed state Medicaid policies. In this position, I also support the creation of amicus briefs for federal cases related to Medicaid and health service access. This role provides me with a glimpse into what I hope to accomplish in my future career; I take complicated health data, analyze the underlying policies, and translate the information into compelling advocacy materials that are accessible to readers. At this point, I have published three blogs, assisted with the filing of two amicus briefs, and will soon publish an issue brief suggesting Congressional action to address Medicaid churn. This is how I am best able to support structural changes to benefit low-income communities, with particular emphasis on connecting children to health coverage.

Given my location in Washington, D.C., I have the unique opportunity to serve as a federal employee, and I currently intern in the Civil Division in the U.S. Department of Justice. I am conducting an ethics analysis on the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, which provides a faster alternative to remedying injuries from vaccines compared to traditional tort litigation. From a public health perspective, this program serves a critical role of balancing vaccine manufacturing, providing injured parties with appropriate compensation, and preventing vaccine hesitancy. However, the program is in need of reform and I hope my perspective will create a compelling story for change.

I am financially responsible for my masters program, and as I am planning to attend law school after I receive my MPH, I hope to exit the masters program debt-free. Next semester I will work three different jobs (DOJ, Medicaid research, and a GA for a health policy course) to try to achieve this goal, but with tuition prices and the cost-of-living in Washington, D.C. I will need additional financial support. This is why I am applying to the Dr. Mary K. Beyrer Graduate Student Scholarship, and I hope you will find that my professional activities align with the vision

for this scholarship. Throughout my studies thus far, I have developed important skills to advocate for structural changes—namely, compassion and translation. As I continue to pursue my masters in public health and health policy, I will refine these skills and learn how to better leverage my voice to enact law and policy change. I humbly acknowledge that I have a lot to learn, but I believe that my public health education has prepared me to approach this future learning from a place of understanding and good intention.