URLEND Trainee Exchange: Alaska
Kelly Smith
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Starting my week in AK
I feel incredibly fortunate to spend a week in Alaska, visiting clinics in both an urban and rural area to get an idea of the healthcare system. I worked with a team of providers for patients with special healthcare needs.

Travel to Kodiak
As I’m told, I had a two-hour Alaska Airlines flight from Anchorage to Juneau, and then a 30-minute flight from Juneau to Kodiak. I arrived at the Kodiak Airport on Wednesday, June 22, 2016. I was greeted by the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) staff and taken to my temporary housing.

Day 1: Kodiak
Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA)
Infant Learning Program (ILP)
The sun is shining, and I’m on my way to meet with Awen Botz. I learned that the program is part of the Alaska Early Intervention Service System and provides family-centered services to families residing in the Kodiak Island Borough. The ILP team serves children birth to 36 months who may have developmental delays, and they provide free screenings and evaluations to determine service eligibility. Niaqul and Michelle showed me the Ages & Stages Questionnaires and how it is used for developmental milestones.

Day 2: Kodiak
Hope Community Resources
Today I met with Corrie Davis, director of community support services at Hope. Hope Community Resources has regional offices across Alaska and offers a variety of community supports for individuals and families with disabilities. I had learned about their unique recreational offerings, including the subsistence program. I explored the new equipment for subsistence fishing and hunting. I then went out on a half-day trip on Lusk Harbor for salmon and halibut. The subsistence program enables individuals with disabilities to take part in one of the main ways of life on Kodiak: fishing. Shooting practice and safety skills happen weekly to prepare for fishing.

Cost-Effectiveness of Hope's Services
Hope is also working collaboratively with members of the community to ensure that individuals with disabilities are aware of the needs of individuals with disabilities and use safe practices.

Day 3: Anchorage
Alaska Native Medical Center
Valerie Schmitz is a pediatric SLP at ANMC, specializing in the primary care clinic. ANMC is an acute, specialty, primary, and behavioral health care provider that offers comprehensive medical services to Alaska Native and American Indian people who live in Alaska. ANMC serves people from all across Alaska and has a facility to house out-of-town patients and their escorts to ensure they receive needed services. Valerie took me on a tour of ANMC to see the hospital setting and learn about SLP services, with whom she often collaborates for patient care. I observed her in the primary clinic where she provides speech and language services to children. She also provided supervision for a SLF student completing her practicum experience. Valerie works alongside one other SLP and they are a team within a group of other providers. Care professionals, including primary care providers, care coordinators, SLPs, and behavioral health staff, have desks set in pods, as opposed to individual offices, to facilitate collaboration.

Day 4: Anchorage
Alaska Center for Pediatrics
Today I returned to ANMC to spend the day with Jessica Adams, who had a full schedule. I arrived in time for the end of the morning meeting in which all of the care providers meet to discuss the day’s patients. Jessica attends to the mental health needs of patients, which enables her to make connections with them and meet their health care needs. She also provides supervision for a SLF student completing her practicum experience. Jessica runs parent classes in which she uses an evidence-based curriculum to provide skills and support parents with children with disabilities. Much of Jessica’s work is preventative, helping parents to learn skills to manage or modify behavior and create a safe environment for their children. I sat in on Jessica’s parent session with one couple and joined her in another parent session. I was able to observe Jessica and her social work practice student in individual therapy with an adolescent patient. I learned a lot about group work and therapy with children and babies. Jessica also provided supervision for a SLF student completing her practicum experience. Valerie works alongside one other SLP and they are a team within a group of other providers. Care professionals, including primary care providers, care coordinators, SLPs, and behavioral health staff, have desks set in pods, as opposed to individual offices, to facilitate collaboration.

Blue skies and sunshine in Kodiak
April 25, 2016, Kodiak, AK

Kodiak Island Borough School District, Peterson Elementary
Cristina Beiber, LEND Fellow, is a SLP/BCBA who made my visit to Kodiak a delight! Cristina took me under her wing, and showed me around Kodiak. I heard about Cristina’s experiences with ANMC and Kodiak, and her giving the plume of ANMC executive director, Mark Imperial. I had the pleasure of observing Cristina integrate behavioral principles with speech therapy in her school. Cristina conducts evaluations, supervises the preschool teachers, and trains other service providers to ensure that they understand the needs of students in need of speech services.
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Day 5: Anchorage

A day to meet AK LEND

I began my morning with a coffee/tea date to meet Jenny Miller, training director for the AK LEND program. Jenny is also a professor in the department of health sciences at University of Alaska Anchorage. She has her daughter in public health, and Jenny shared with me about her specific research interest in maternal and child health. Jenny shared all about the workings of AK LEND and the way leadership projects are conducted. Jenny and I met Dan Van Den Berg, LEND training coordinator, for lunch, and I learned even more about the AK LEND program, such as how families with a disability gain experience interacting with families outside of the “expert” role. I had the opportunity to spend an hour at Center for Human Development (CHD), which is the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) through which AK LEND is run. I met the Alaska believes in person and through distance technology and shared about URLEND. Unfortunately, I couldn’t stay for the whole seminar as I had to head to the airport.

Final Thoughts & Thank You

At the beginning of March, I received an email and phone call from Martin Sier, executive director of the Rural Institute in Montana, which is our UCEDD. Marty asked if I had any interest in going to Alaska to visit the AK LEND. He did not have many details but my immediate answer was, “Yes!” I had been to Alaska once before and fell in love with the mountains, oceans, and wildlife. After speaking with Marty (AK LEND coordinator) on the phone for over an hour, I decided to make my trip. Before I knew it, I was flying off on my Alaskan adventure.

What struck me the most on this trip to Alaska was not the jagged mountain peaks and vast areas of wilderness but the people. I experienced an overwhelming amount of hospitality and genuineness from every individual with whom I had the honor to share my Alaska experience. Whether it was being greeted at the Kodiak airport by Cristina with a warm hug or being met at the Anchorage airport by Jenny and Dan, I was consistently in the company of such amazing individuals. Not only were those with whom I met kind, but each and every professional was compassionate and highly invested in their work. I was blown away by the various systems of care and programs offered to individuals with disabilities across Alaska. From the subsistence program in Kodiak to behavioral health consultation in a pediatric setting in Anchorage, I observed innovative and progressive examples of health care for individuals with disabilities. I am so grateful to have been given the opportunity to connect with so many wonderful people and care providers and hope to be able to work with them in the future.

Special Thank You

Jessica Adams  
Cristina Beier  
Marly Blair  
Amy Boit  
Kyle Colling  
Corrine Davis  
Judy Dyer  
Jenny Miller  
Lauren Nelson  
Valerie Schmitz  
Dan Van Den Berg  
Sarah Winter  
AK LEND Folks.

Through the Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities Program (URLEND), trainees from different disciplines are given the opportunity to attend an exchange experience in another PacWest LEND program. The exchange experience includes a full agenda meeting different leaders and touring a variety of organizations involved in the care of children and youth with special health care needs. These experiences allow trainees to compare and contrast how different programs function in different geographic regions. It also allows trainees to meet strong leaders from different fields in different systems, states, and cultures, who are caring for children with special health care needs and their families. Financial support for these exchanges is provided by LEND program sending the trainee. Following is a photo journal by trainee Katie Ahlers about her experience.