



SAFER – Student Aid for Field Epidemiology Response Team

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The Epidemiology Program at the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health (MEZCOPH) at the University of Arizona identified the need to provide additional opportunities for students to apply what they were learning in a practical setting. An assessment was conducted in 2004 to determine the needs of local and state health departments and the level of interest for working with public health students. From this assessment and pilot student experiences, the Student Aid for Field Epidemiology Response (SAFER) course (EPID/CPH 596D) was developed to include trainings within health departments and field experiences. These efforts have been sustained through funding from the Maricopa County Department of Public Health and incorporation of experiences into coursework.

Establishing student teams able to respond to public health incidents benefits the fields of preparedness and epidemiology in two major ways. First, the students can serve as trained surge capacity for the health departments in the case of an outbreak or other public health incident. Second, participation allows public health graduate students to gain real-world experience in a health department, outside of an internship or thesis project. To date, U of A is one of only 11 accredited schools of public health have established some form of student response teams.

Since SAFER was formally established in the spring of 2005, the Pima County Health Department has conducted a training session for each group of new students every semester. In the past 8 years, SAFER students have worked over 1500 hours on 55 outbreaks, 10 surveillance activities and 5 POD activities with multiple public health agencies around Arizona. In addition, multiple SAFER students have continued working with health departments either as volunteers or to complete their internships.

The goal of the program is to continue to work closely with the Epidemiologists at the health department so that students can assist when the need arises and gain valuable experience as well. Establishing on-going projects that meet the needs of both sides has also been discussed and projects are in the process of being developed.