

Student Spotlight- Rebecca Sherrod, MPH, MA



1. Tell us about yourself

I am a Virginia native and recently moved to Boston, MA, with my fiancé Rob and our rabbit George! I have an MPH in infectious disease epidemiology and an MA in political science. I am currently a Clinical Research Coordinator with the VA Boston Healthcare System.

2. What do you like about public health?

I have mainly worked on the academic side of public health, and one of the things that always sticks out to me is the passion and creativity that my colleagues have for solving these really complex public health problems. People have a right to health, and it's very encouraging to see an entire field of dedicated researchers and practitioners working to ensure that right.

3. Why are you interested in the field of emergency preparedness and response?

I think we sometimes forget how dependent we are, not only on the health of other people but also on the health of the environment and animals around us. New and re-emerging zoonotic diseases are some of the biggest threats to human health. Unfortunately, many of these new zoonotic disease outbreaks create emergencies that surpass local healthcare and sometimes national capability and capacity. I am very interested in developing preparedness and response capability in the context of zoonotic disease outbreaks!

4. Can you describe a project or experience that helped you in deciding to pursue a career in this particular field?

I was completing my MPH towards the end of the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak. My research focused on the 'lessons learned' from the Ebola outbreak response by the WHO. While the WHO has the normative and technical expertise, they are not designed to be operational or run significant operational response efforts.

This research sparked my passion for understanding what it would take to make the WHO operational. The WHO currently spearheads an organization called GOARN (global outbreak alert and response network) that pools operational expertise all over the world. In my opinion, this is the WHO's attempt to be more 'operational' on its constrained and decreasing yearly budget. As a result, my MA thesis focused on the WHO and sGOARN and how international politics play an enormous role in what

emergency preparedness and response look like on a global scale. So, I guess my decision to pursue this field has been based on a lot of unanswered questions on how the WHO and the international arena plan to better prepare and respond to multi-national outbreaks.

5. Who do you consider to be vulnerable populations, and why?

This was a population I was introduced to during my MPH – but a vulnerable population, in my opinion, are the rural communities in the Appalachian Mountains. Most of the towns in Appalachia are dependent on the waning coal mining industry and relatively poor. The opioid epidemic has particularly hit these areas hard, and there are few resources for communities to address the issue.

6. What is a current emergency or disaster that you believe is critical to address?

I feel like I have to say COVID-19. However, if I were to pick something less apparent, I think it is critical to address the ongoing Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

7. How do you handle stress and pressure?

I became a big runner in college. It can be a chore to get off the couch sometimes, but there is nothing better than the feeling you have after a long run. But I also believe mint chocolate chip ice cream can fix any problem.

8. If you could cure a disease, which would it be and why?

This is a little obscure, but I would cure Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Variant CJD can be spread through the consumption of infected Bovine meat. In general, Prion diseases, while very rare, are always fatal. The professor who taught me about Variant CJD was also a large-animal veterinarian and effectively scared the whole class from eating beef ever again!

9. Who is your favorite public health figure, and why?

My favorite public health figure is my former professor and director of Virginia Tech's Master of Public Health program Susan Marmagas. Professor Marmagas worked tirelessly to better health outcomes in rural Appalachian communities. She was incredibly passionate not only about her research but also in mentoring the next generation of public health professionals. She passed away two years ago after a difficult fight with cancer, and it was an incredibly severe loss for her young family and the Blacksburg community.

10. What is next for you after you complete your MPH degree?

I will be applying to Ph.D. programs within the next year or two. I hope to continue to expand my work on infectious disease outbreak preparedness and response and global health security.