

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH FIELD EXPERIENCE REPORT

***HELPING THE MEDICARE POPULATION***

BY

**KATIE BREESE**  
MPH CANDIDATE

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**GRADUATE COMMITTEE:**

SANDY PROCTER  
ROBERTA RIPORELLA  
PAULA PETERS

**FIELD EXPERIENCE SITE:**

K-STATE RESEARCH AND EXTENSION, RILEY COUNTY OFFICE  
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**FIELD EXPERIENCE PRECEPTOR:**

VIRGINIA BARNARD, MPH

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
MANHATTAN, KANSAS

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## **Summary**

This report will briefly detail a field experience completed at Riley County Extension office under the supervision of the director Jennifer Wilson and preceptor Virginia Barnard, MPH. The scope of the work involved tasks related to Medicare. The primary number of hours were spent counseling the Medicare population on Part D prescription drug plan choices.

**Subject Keywords: Medicare, SHICK, Riley County Extension**

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## **Chapter 1 - Field Experience Scope of Work**

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, or Kansas State Research and Extension for short, is a statewide network of educators who provide education on a variety of topics aimed at strengthening families, youth, communities and ensuring a safe, strong, sustainable food and fiber system. The Riley County Extension office, located in Manhattan, Kansas, was host to my field experience. This Extension office has several staff members that work together to address a diverse assortment of community needs. My preceptor was Ginny Barnard, MPH, and Family and Consumer Sciences Agent. She assists the community in many ways with topics related to home and family and health and nutrition. I also worked very closely with Jennifer Wilson, Riley County Extension Director.

Each year Director Jennifer Wilson works to provide information and assistance to the Medicare population in Riley County and surrounding areas. She helps to minimize confusion regarding Medicare by offering informative open-to-the-community presentations and by providing face-to-face enrollment assistance. A large majority of the face-to-face assistance occurs between October 15- December 7<sup>th</sup> during Medicare Part D prescription drug plan Open Enrollment. Though she is able to help many people each year, she generally has a waitlist form each enrollment period. During Open Enrollment for 2015, I was able to offer assistance as well, which eliminated a need for any waitlist.

Prior to assisting the Medicare population with Medicare Part D plan selection, and other Medicare related choices, it is necessary to complete the Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansas (SHICK) training. This is a series of training courses that informs on many facets of Medicare. There is an initial self-study that includes many topics, like health insurance terms, Medicare overview, Medicare coverage rules for Part A, Part B, Part D, and Medigap plans. The self-study is 16-hours in duration. This is followed by two 6-hour in-person training sessions that provide even more details on these same subjects. Upon completion of the 28-hours of training and successful examination, I became a SHICK counselor.

Throughout the duration of Part D Open Enrollment, October 15<sup>th</sup> through December 7<sup>th</sup>, the Riley County Extension office made appointments for members of the Medicare population to meet with Jennifer and me. At these appointments we would assist the clients in making Part D plan selections for 2016. The counseling sessions would occur at the Riley County Extension office. The majority of my contact with community members was face-to-face, however there were times I would follow up with individuals over the phone. I shadowed Jennifer Wilson for the first few sessions then I conducted the counseling sessions entirely on my own.

Prior to the scheduled session the community members would fill out information sheets, which included details about their prescription medications. Using this information and the Plan Finder located on Medicare.gov, I would screen the individual's plan options and ready documentation of their best options in advance of the counseling session. During the counseling session I would present this information, answer questions, and, if a decision was made, assist with enrolling in the chosen plan. The individuals would leave with confirmation that he or she was enrolled as well as an approximation of their financial responsibility in the coming year, more often than not this involved a financial savings. Combined Jennifer and I performed 216 plan comparisons and those people that switched plans experience an average savings of 955 dollars (See Table 1).

**Table 1 Riley County Extension 2015 Medicare Part D Open Enrollment Summary**

2015 Medicare- Open Enrollment Period									
	<i># Plan Comparisons Done</i>	<i># changing plans</i>	<i>Staying on current plan</i>	<i>New to Medicare D</i>	<i>Office Visits</i>	<i>Message/ Phone Calls</i>	<i>Total Savings*</i>	<i>Average *Savings/ Person</i>	<i>Average *Savings/ Person Changing Plans</i>
<b>Total</b>	216	92	124	6	159	57	\$87,880	\$407.00	<b>\$955.00</b>

Medicare Part D prescription drug plan counseling comprised the primary scope of work for my field experience. In addition to attending the SHICK training and conducting these counseling sessions, I helped with a few other Medicare related tasks. As stated, each year Jennifer Wilson conducts informative Medicare presentations for the community. One of my first responsibilities was to help update the presentation she gave fall 2015 before Open Enrollment began. In addition to updating the presentation I helped to ready the folders that she hands out at the presentation. I also attended the presentation, which was a valuable experience in that I both witnessed how she presents and was able to help answer some questions from community members. I will have the same involvement in the upcoming spring 2016 presentation.

The rest of my field experience time was spent assisting with a new project entitled, “Medicare Moments.” Medicare Moments are a series of short video presentations intended to answer questions commonly received related to Medicare. This was the idea of Jennifer Wilson and Saline County Extension Agent, Debra Wood. In collaboration with them I aided in writing and editing scripts that were then used to create the video presentations. I also helped by collecting visual aids and creating the presentations. The videos include the topics of Health Savings Accounts and Medicare, the “donut hole” or coverage gap, and K-State Retirees and Medicare. These will complement the series of videos already created by the Centers for Medicare & Medicare Services and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The series of videos by CMS and HHS, while thorough, are not well known about by the Medicare population nor do they easily lend to watching as a series. They are published on YouTube, along with many other videos that may not provide such accurate information. To address this, I was charged with compiling a list of the videos with URLs and titles

that describe the videos. This list will be published alongside the Medicare Moments Series on the KSRE website and will be advertised to the community at the Medicare presentations.

The learning objectives for my field experience were to explain the basic purpose and mission of K-State Research and Extension, describe the barriers and gaps most older Americans have to navigate health insurance choices, and interpret health insurance information for public consumers to make a decision. Through the combination of my work with Riley County Extension office I was able to achieve each objective. I gained a better idea of the many ways Kansas State Research and Extension strengthens communities. I received a significant amount of training about Medicare and was therefore able to identify some of the barriers older Americans may have in navigating health insurance choices and was also better enabled to interpret health insurance information.

As stated, I completed each of the activities to be performed as outlined in my field experience agreement. They were the 16-hr self-study/testing, plus two 6-hr training days for SHICK counselor training, attend Medicare Basics Workshop held by Riley County Extension Director, Jennifer Wilson, and provide one-on-one counseling for Medicare recipients regarding Part D prescription drug plans primarily during Open Enrollment (October 15-Dec 7, 2015). As a result of choosing the thesis option, there was not an anticipated project or product required. However, my involvement in the Medicare Moments project will eventually produce a tangible product that has the potential to greatly help the Medicare population.

The 180 hours I spent during my field experience with the Riley County Extension office were both rewarding and informative. Through meeting my objectives and completing the tasks outlined in my agreement I was able to sharpen skills I will need in the professional world. Additionally, working with the Medicare population helped me to make a connection between my academic studies and offering tangible assistance to actual people. My thesis involved examining health determinants and the many nuances that can lead to various health outcomes. Of course, one of these nuances is access to care, therefore assisting people with matters related to health insurance coincided with my research. The combination of this academic study with the

practical experience gained in my field experience have made me more prepared to work alongside other professionals and provide meaningful assistance to community members.

## **Chapter 2 - Core and Emphasis Areas**

This section will briefly detail how I achieved the necessary knowledge for the core MPH areas as well as the public health nutrition emphasis areas. Knowledge for each of these areas was achieved through a combination of classes, work completed as a GRA, field experience work, and completion of my thesis. Not one of these experiences exceeded the other in helping me achieve needed knowledge, rather it was the combination of each of them that enabled me to achieve a well-rounded education.

### ***Biostatistics***

I completed the biostatistics course through online delivery. This did not prove to be the ideal way for me to gain this knowledge and skills. I was able to build on the knowledge I gained in this class through taking the Introduction to SAS class. The vast majority of statistical knowledge I gained occurred through taking Nutritional Epidemiology and to a greater degree through self-study while completing my thesis. I enlisted the help of a tutor and that experience undoubtedly helped increase my knowledge of statistics the most.

### ***Environmental Health***

The majority of my knowledge about environmental health came from taking Environmental Toxicology. I found this class to be most useful in exposing me to potential factors in the environment that may have adverse health effects. To a very small extent my literature review for my thesis also brought to my attention certain conditions in the environment that could have health effects. I will now consider what may be transpiring in the environment when I examine health determinant and health outcomes in a given scenario.

### ***Epidemiology***

Introduction to Epidemiology was, in fact, my very first introduction to the subject. This class provided a solid foundation in the subject and my other coursework then built on it. In

particular Public Health Nutrition and to a greater extent Nutritional Epidemiology enhanced my understanding of epidemiology. The latter class has motivated me to consider future classes, including more related to statistics, that may strengthen my knowledge overall. I have a better understanding of the appropriate use of and interpretation of data having taken these courses.

### ***Health Services Administration***

The Health Services Administration class I took was one of the most interesting classes of all for me. This class broadened my understanding of the many interrelated systems of health care services. I gained more insight in the complexities involved with health care. Knowledge gained from this class was greatly supplemented by my work as a GRA as much of that work was related to health insurance literacy and other barriers to care. Of course, my field experience gave me practical experience in helping consumers of health care.

### ***Social and Behavioral Sciences***

The Social and Behavioral Bases for Public Health was my favorite class. From this class I strengthened my understanding of theories, concepts, and models that are fundamentally related to public health. This class provided important context for examining health outcomes. Another class I took that greatly enhanced my knowledge of this core area was Introduction to Health Psychology, which provided great detail related to theories and human behavior and health. My work as a GRA and in my field experience were related to this area as well. My thesis was entirely related to this area and enhanced my knowledge of these concepts the most. I would have greatly enjoyed a concentration in this area.

### ***Public Health Nutrition Concentration***

The public health nutrition curriculum better prepared me to use nutritional principles to guide and evaluate intervention in a professional setting. Considering I began the MPH program without a background in nutrition, I especially benefited from the required and elective coursework. While I do not profess to be an expert in topics related to nutrition, I now have the skills to evaluate whether an intervention is evidenced-based and that will be invaluable in my

future professional endeavors. The Public Health Nutrition, Nutritional Epidemiology, and Graduate Seminar in Human Nutrition provided knowledge, skills, and public speaking opportunities that will help in areas outside of nutrition as well. Functional Foods for Chronic Disease Prevention and other more specific electives I took did improve my knowledge of very specific nutrition principles. A few examples of that was Nutritional Metabolism and Nutrition and Exercise.