Employee Spotlight: Sara Simmonds



Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?
I grew up in a rural township near Flint, Michigan. I earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Michigan State University degree in Environmental Studies and Applications. After graduation, I left for South America where I lived for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer focusing on projects to improve water quality and reforestation efforts.

After I returned, I was hired as a sanitarian at the Kent County Health Department. I started working in the General Programs i.e., well, septic, housing, etc. and I quickly realized that my experience in the Peace Corps and from my education served me well in this profession. At that time, it was a team of eight with six men and two women. Creating change has always been a personal driver for me so as I worked, I also earned a Master of Public Administration degree from GVSU. I chose this degree because I wanted to better understand and maneuver in the governmental system. Later, I was promoted to Supervising Sanitarian and then, in 2017, I was promoted to be the first female Environmental Health Director for Kent County. After 22 years at the Health Department, I still cannot figure out where the time has gone.

What is your position at Kent County and what individuals do you work with?
I am the Environmental Health Division Director. In my role, I lead and oversee a staff of 50+ environmental health professionals who work hard every day in multiple programs, promoting and protecting residents from physical, biological, and chemical risks. A few of those risks are: foodborne illness, bloodborne pathogen exposure, consumption of contaminated water, and ingestion of neuro toxins like lead.

On any given day, my responsibilities span various roles: from handling administrative tasks related to HR, making operational decisions, and addressing environmental health emergencies to addressing concerns from the Board of Commissioners, collaborating with the EH management team on intricate matters, advocating for local resources with state partners, addressing resident concerns, and fostering local partnerships. I primarily work with the Environmental Health team, the Health Department team, internal County partners, multiple state agency partners, businesses, and/or residents.

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What are two or three things that staff should know about your role?

The community at large doesn't always understand what Environmental Health is. To set the table, it is the science and practice of preventing human injury and illness, promoting well-being, and mitigating exposure to hazardous agents in various environmental settings that may adversely affect human health. With that said, there are three forces impacting environmental health in Kent County: Under-resourced mandated services, community needs and expectations, and looming changes coming from federal and state partners. Currently, I am working hard to braid these three converging forces to create a sustainable system that meets the County's values and needs of the community.

Working in the Kent County Environmental Health Division can be intense at times and is very fast paced. The work of this role requires a lot of on mental flexibility, technical knowledge, and the ability to adapt on the fly. For decades, a reaction-based system has been tooled to respond to issues such as groundwater contamination, vapor intrusion, and even lead (Pb). This means that the funding comes after the "bad thing" occurred While response will always be needed, it could be a more successful strategy if we moved toward a "and/both" approach which addresses both prevention and response activities. Prevention is typically much more efficient than reacting to something that is or has happened..

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

Firstly, it is really rewarding to work with the EH team. Our success in EH is because of their hard work and commitment to serving our community. It is rewarding to see them achieve their goals and advance professionally. I like to spend time with new staff to learn from and about them. Also, the team does a great job of gently keeping my idealistic feet grounded on planet Earth. They are truly great people.

Secondly, I have had the opportunity to participate in complex environmental health issues like the PFAS contamination in Northern Kent County, the Lead (Pb) Action Team, and interstate foodborne illness outbreaks. I learned through these experiences that I find working on complex issues gratifying. I like creative problem solving, fostering interagency relationships, and creating systems. It fills my cup.

Do you have any interesting/ fun stories about residents you have worked with?

Oh, there are too many! Early in my career, I was working with a vacant home on a lake that had sold in a real estate transaction. The septic system failed inspection because it was in the water table so, because of the site conditions, the only option was to abandon the existing system and put in watertight holding tanks. To ensure that the new unused tanks were not taking in groundwater, we will do a dye test around the outside of the tanks to look for leaks. The tanks were installed in March. I met the excavator and tank...

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manufacturer who was setting the tanks on site. I hadn't used dye at that point in my career, so I didn't realize that it only took... a couple of drops to do the test. I poured at least a quarter of the bottle of green biodegradable dye around the tanks and I immediately knew we had problems. Primarily, because the tanks were not watertight. They had green dye seeping in. Secondly there was vivid neon green dye everywhere. I mean EVERYWHERE.

The excavator was livid because he still had to work in and around the area around the tanks. hings went downhill quickly. As he was mumbling some very creative and colorful phrases about me and the situation, I got the nervous giggles. I tried to contain them but couldn't. Short of calling a vac truck, there was absolutely nothing to be done to improve the situation. It was near St. Patrick's Day, my favorite holiday because of my Gram. In that moment I thought of her. All I could I think to do was smile and say, "Happy St. Patrick's Day."

Is there anything else you want to say/talk about?

I had the opportunity to oversee the Animal Shelter for several years. This professionally stretched me in positive ways. There were positive experiences as well as tough ones. It was a wild ride. I have a ton of respect for the AS team. I am forever grateful for the patience and laughs with Dr. Davison, Scott Dobbins and Namiko Ota-Noveskey. It is awesome to see the positive changes at the Shelter under the leadership of Director Angela Hollinshead who is elevating the Shelter to a level it deserves.