

Outbreak Investigation at Golden Gate Fields

In March 2020, the Governor of California proclaimed a State of Emergency in California as a result of the threat of the novel SARS-2 Coronavirus (COVID-19). California Department of Public Health's (CDPH) California Epidemiologic Investigation Service (Cal-EIS) Fellow was an integral part of the COVID-19 response.

CDPH runs two training programs, Preventive Medicine Residency (PMR) and the Cal-EIS Fellowship (Cal-EIS), which are supported by the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant. PMR is a two-year residency program in which physicians gain knowledge, skills and experience in preventive medicine and public health. Cal-EIS is a one-year fellowship program in which recent MPH graduates gain applied epidemiology skills and experience. Cal-EIS Fellow, Ruwan Thilakaratne, MPH played an integral role in responding to a COVID-19 outbreak investigation at Golden Gate Fields (GGF). GGF is a horse racetrack located in Berkeley, California and experienced a large COVID-19 outbreak in November and December 2020. Of the 500 people who worked and or lived on the grounds of GGF, 60% tested positive for COVID-19, with several individuals hospitalized and one who died. Ruwan assisted the CDPH Occupational Health Branch to carry out this investigation. Ruwan created and implemented an electronic survey of the employees at GGF. Ruwan analyzed case, control and laboratory data to identify risk factors for transmission. Ruwan's results led to greater understanding of the role genetic sequencing plays in tracking the spread of disease in an outbreak. After the GGF COVID-19 outbreak ended in January 2021, Ruwan contributed to analysing, writing and publishing findings from two aspects of the investigation: 1) the utility of a rapid antigen test to identify individuals infected with COVID-19 and 2) the impact worker behaviors, job titles and living situations have on COVID-19 test positivity. The investigation at GGF of COVID-19 cases led to greater understanding of COVID-19 associated symptoms and the severity of illness. In addition, Ruwan contributed to the policies and practices implemented at GGF to reduce COVID-19 transmission. His role in this outbreak investigation at GGF was critical to help stop the spread of COVID-19 while supporting CDPH's vision of healthier communities, including working communities and vulnerable workers.

PMR trains 5 Residents per year and Cal-EIS trains 12 Fellows per year. The goal of Cal-EIS is to provide experience in epidemiology and public health practice during placements with governmental health agencies and to assist local health departments in emergency outbreak and other field epidemiology investigations when the opportunity arises. Trainees achieve epidemiology and emergency response competencies over the course of the year and are eligible to work at public health agencies in leadership positions after graduating. Cal-EIS takes pride in its important public health workforce pipeline.

Federal Fiscal Year 2021 Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant Success Story by the Preventive Medicine Residency (PMR) and CA Epidemiologic Investigation Service (Cal-EIS) Fellowship Program