

Sasakawa Nursing Fellow 2024 Annual Report

Mitsuki Kitagawa

Johns Hopkins University

Bloomberg School of Public Health

March 31, 2026

I. Introduction

Since entering the Master of Public Health (MPH) program at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in June 2025, I have been studying the foundations of public health while also gaining practical experience closely related to global health.

Through my past work in disaster response and humanitarian assistance in Japan and overseas, I came to understand that health problems are shaped not only by medical issues or limited access to care, but also by complex social, economic, and political factors. For this reason, one of the main goals of my study abroad experience has been to deepen my understanding of these issues from a broader perspective and strengthen my ability to contribute through health systems and other forms of support.

Since starting the program, I have had an intensive and rewarding experience. In addition to coursework, I have had opportunities to engage with students, faculty members, and practitioners from diverse backgrounds. I have also participated in a simulation exercise, worked as a Research Assistant on an evaluation project at the Center for Humanitarian Health, and completed an internship with UNRWA. These experiences have helped me think more concretely about health systems and humanitarian health in crisis settings, and they have strongly shaped how I hope to contribute in the future.

II. Coursework

During my first summer term after arriving in the United States, I mainly studied foundational public health subjects such as epidemiology, environmental health, and health policy. Through these courses, I developed a clearer understanding that health problems should not be explained only by individual effort or medical care, but must also be understood within overlapping social, economic, and environmental conditions.

In later terms, I took a wide range of courses based on my interests, including Humanitarian Health, Health Systems, Management, Quality Assurance, and Evaluation. These courses gave me an opportunity to reconsider, from new angles, many of the challenges I had experienced in my previous work in disaster response and humanitarian assistance. Through my current studies, I have been able to organize the issues I observed in practice more clearly and think more broadly about the systems and operational structures behind them.

In addition, the public health environment in the world has been changing significantly under the current U.S. administration. At a time when the future direction of global health is difficult to predict, even faculty members have had to navigate these changes while continuing their teaching. Many class discussions addressed these developments and their impact. Questions such as how political leadership affects public health, how we should respond to sudden policy changes, how to build resilient health systems that do not shift dramatically with each administration, and how to avoid overdependence on a single funding source are not easy to answer. However, I found it very valuable to study in an environment where faculty and students could openly and honestly discuss these uncertainties. Being in the United States at this time and taking many related courses has been an important opportunity for reflection and critical thinking.

III. Practical Learning and Extracurricular Activities

1. Participation in a Simulation in Abu Dhabi

In November 2025, I was selected through a university screening process to participate in a 10-day simulation in Abu Dhabi. This simulation was organized by CNN Academy in collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health and the Gates Foundation. Together with more than 100 journalism students from around the world, I took part in an exercise based on a cholera pandemic in a humanitarian crisis setting.

The MPH students from Johns Hopkins were assigned roles as communication officers within the Health Communications & Community Engagement Working Group in the Health Cluster, representing organizations such as ministries of health, local organizations, and the Red Cross. I was assigned to represent the Red Cross. Over the course of one week, I worked on drafting press releases, responding at press conferences, answering interviews from student journalists, and joining field visits.

Through this experience, I learned in a practical way how difficult it is to organize accurate information in chaotic situations, coordinate with other agencies, and communicate effectively with the public during crises. What I found particularly important was that crisis communication is not only about controlling infection and protecting health, but also about addressing fear, stigma, discrimination, and confusion caused by poor or inconsistent messaging. I also gained practical insight into how health messages can be communicated to diverse populations.

2. UNRWA Evaluation Project and Internship

Since October 2025, I have been involved in an evaluation project through the Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health, focused on UNRWA Health Department activities in Gaza and the West Bank after October 2023. In addition, I had the opportunity to intern with UNRWA and spent about one month in Amman, Jordan, during the winter break. I was also selected for a Johns Hopkins Field Experience Award, which provided university support for this field learning.

During the internship, I joined the daily work of the UNRWA Health Department headquarters. Through regular internal meetings and Health Cluster meetings, I learned about changing conditions on the ground, priority issues, and coordination with other agencies. It was a valuable opportunity to observe how the headquarters functions make practical decisions in an ongoing crisis about what to maintain, expand, or revise.

I also supported analysis and publication preparation related to adolescent suicidal ideation and other suicide-related issues based on the Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS). In addition, I contributed to drafting an internal project evaluation plan, organizing data, interpreting findings, and assisting with document preparation. Furthermore, I visited the Marka Camp clinic in Amman, where I observed patient flow, service structure, care processes, and operational strengths and challenges at the facility level. This helped me better understand how discussions and planning at headquarters are connected to actual service delivery in the field. It was also an honor to observe and learn from the leadership of Dr. Akihiro Seita, Director of the UNRWA Health Department.

IV. Lessons Learned and Reflections

Overall, through both my studies at Johns Hopkins and my practical experiences, I have learned again that health issues cannot be addressed only through individual medical services. They need to be understood through the interaction of many factors, including health inequity, system design, resource allocation, management, quality assurance, and evaluation.

I have also come to understand more deeply that supporting people's health requires not only field-level response, but also the systems that make that response possible, including operations, coordination, evaluation, accountability, and communication. Learning how to build evidence in practical ways and use it for program improvement and accountability, as well as gaining the skills needed to do this, will be highly valuable in my future career.

At the same time, these experiences have also made me strongly aware that modern global health, including humanitarian action, operates under severe constraints. In a rapidly changing world, including increasing and prolonged humanitarian crises, I have gained deep respect for the many professionals who continue working every day to support affected populations under difficult conditions. Their efforts have been a strong source of inspiration and motivation for me.

V. Future Goals

With about two months remaining until graduation from the MPH program, I would like to continue deepening my learning while preparing for the submission of my Capstone project. As one component of the UNRWA evaluation project I am currently involved in, I plan to involve quantitative Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis on operational changes related to major historical events. Through this work, I hope to further strengthen my understanding of health systems, evaluation, and management in humanitarian crisis settings.

After graduation, I plan to return to Japan and apply both my past professional experience and what I have learned through this study abroad experience from a nongovernmental perspective. Building on my previous work in emergency medical and health response, I hope to contribute to strengthening organizational capacity for humanitarian and global health work, as well as community-based health in Japan.

VI. Acknowledgements

Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the generous support of the Sasakawa Health Foundation, which has made this study abroad experience and these practical learning opportunities possible. The education and experiences I have gained at Johns Hopkins University, as well as the opportunity to meet diverse colleagues and friends, would not have been possible without this support.

I will continue to work hard so that I can make full use of the knowledge and experience I have gained here and contribute, even in a small way, to improving the health and well-being of people in Japan and the international community. Thank you again very much for your kind support.