Accreditation provides an impetus for Kansas Department of Health and Environment to complete the National Public Health Performance Standards

Several factors came together in a “perfect storm” for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) that moved the agency to complete several important and strategic assessments at the state level in preparation for accreditation. Among those projects was a public health systems assessment using the National Public Health Performance Standards (NPHPS).

Like many states today, Kansas is facing significant systems change: decreased funding and capacity during a time of increased need for services. As Kansas entered a new legislative session, KDHE needed to determine where it wanted to focus its resources.

Steps Taken:

With state accreditation as the impetus, KDHE was able to bring together several parallel activities to prepare for accreditation. The agency had already completed a strategic plan. The Healthy Kansans assessment had been implemented twice in the past, and it was time to do another assessment to determine leading health indicators. Additionally, KDHE’s leadership knew that they needed to perform a public health system assessment as part of their state health assessment, which would inform both the agency strategic plan and its state health improvement plan.

Kansas is one of 23 states to conduct the NPHPS evaluation and did so for the first time in 2008. At that time, however, only KDHE officials participated, says Brenda Nickel, director of KDHE’s Center for Performance Management. “The intent at the time was to also conduct it with our external partners statewide,” Nickel says. “But in 2008, the recession was going on, and that opportunity was never fully realized.”

Consequently, KDHE decided to complete the assessment again in October 2012, this time with its external stakeholders. Nickel thinks this will have a positive impact on the report. “I think it is going to provide a richer report because we actually have those individuals with boots on the ground in communities, as well as state-level partners, who are helping answer these questions,” she says.

Results:

The evaluation’s results were issued in a report at the end of 2012 and forwarded to each of the participating organizations, as well as to the Healthy Kansans 2020 steering committee, which is currently working to prioritize the state’s health initiatives for the next decade.
Nickel admits that it was rather ambitious to decide to complete so many assessments within such a tight timeframe. However, the agency now feels well-prepared for the next five years, and that the NPHPS assessment was “value added.”

Lessons Learned:

Reflecting on the process, Nickel says, “Anybody that is thinking about systems change, whether you chose to or are forced to, when you look at the public health system and understand how they link together, then you begin to recognize that there are some real gifts out there to be grasped.” KDHE’s “perfect storm” demonstrates how much a state health agency can accomplish when it rallies around a common, important project, particularly when resources are limited. This allows a state to accomplish more with the resources it has available.

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