

Health Department Accreditation:
A Guide and Perspectives from
Leaders to Their Peers

Accreditation Leadership Guide



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) would like to thank all of the individuals who contributed to this guide through key informant interviews, resource sharing, and feedback on drafts. Their firsthand knowledge and experiences were invaluable in the development of this resource.

Thanks to the following public health leaders who were interviewed as part of the process to create this guide:

CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Jewel Mullen, Commissioner

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

James C. Howgate, II, Chief of Staff

Scott A. Uhlich, Accreditation Coordinator

Chanelle Avila, Performance Improvement Manager

IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND WELFARE DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Elke Shaw-Tulloch, Administrator

Traci Berreth, Bureau Chief, Public Health Business Operations, Accreditation Coordinator

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HOSPITALS

John Thomas "J.T." Lane, Assistant Secretary for Public Health

OKLAHOMA STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Terry Cline, Secretary Health and Human Services and Commissioner Department of Health

Julie Cox-Kain, Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services and Senior Deputy Commissioner

VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Tracy Dolan, Deputy Commissioner

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Dennis Worsham, Deputy Secretary of Public Health Operations

Judy Hall, Performance Officer

We also appreciate the following peer networks and entities for their input and review of this resource.

ASTHO Performance Policy Committee

ASTHO Accredited States Learning Community

Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB)

CDC OSTLTS Division of Public Health Performance Improvement

This project was funded by ASTHO with support from CDC under Cooperative Agreement 1U38OT000211-01, and in partnership with Dr. Ronald W. Chapman, MD, MPH. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the sponsor.

ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND TERRITORIAL HEALTH OFFICIALS

2231 Crystal Drive, Suite 450
Arlington, VA 22202
202-371-9090 tel
202-371-9797 fax
www.astho.org

RONALD W. CHAPMAN, MD, MPH

Past Director and State Health Officer
California Department of Public Health,
an accredited health department.

Introduction

Accreditation is a journey that starts long before and continues long after receiving the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) plaque.

Accreditation is a process for transforming your health department into a high performing organization that delivers quality services to improve the lives of the people you serve. This is accomplished by holding the department accountable to a nationally accepted set of standards developed by your public health peers. The accreditation process is all about doing the best you can with the resources you have.

This resource is not intended to provide a detailed list of accreditation requirements—PHAB and ASTHO have many resources to help in this area. Rather, this guide shares the key role that leadership plays in accreditation and was created with input and review from state health department leaders.

Fully engaged executive leadership is critical for a successful accreditation effort. Terms used to describe such leadership include: executive sponsorship, executive champions, shepherds, and cheerleaders. According to interviews with state health department leaders, a department's leaders need to make a commitment to accreditation and maintain support. The leaders must mobilize all fiscal, staffing, and time resources needed for the effort.

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS A LEADER?

Achieving accreditation is an historical moment in the life of a public health department and provides a platform that tells the story of the department's great work. Leaders need to set expectations and extol the benefits of going through the accreditation process. Many leaders create a vision of a culture of quality to drive accreditation work through a number of activities:

Lead open houses to regularly communicate with staff about the accreditation process.

Speak at staff meetings about the benefits and importance of accreditation.

Ensure that accreditation is a standing item on executive team agendas.

Publish monthly articles in the department newsletter highlighting the great work accomplished through the accreditation process.

Create and post videos of leadership describing the benefits and importance of accreditation.

Participate in the accreditation process by serving on domain teams and reviewing documents chosen for submission. Some leaders have gone so far as to personally review every document prior to it being uploaded in e-PHAB.

Encourage managers and the executive team to participate in the accreditation process. This step is key to ensuring that the process is not merely viewed as the director's project.

Some department leaders have been trained as PHAB site visitors and have completed site visits. This is an excellent way to prepare for your own accreditation process.

Promote fun activities such as potlucks, posters, or storyboards, or wear pins that promote accreditation efforts.

Hire and support key staff to lead the accreditation effort.

WHAT IS NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH ACCREDITATION?

In 2003, the Institute of Medicine published a report that called for the establishment of a national steering committee to examine the benefits of accrediting governmental public health departments. In 2004, CDC identified accreditation as a key strategy to strengthen public health infrastructure. With support from CDC and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, PHAB was formed as a nonprofit entity and program development began in May 2007. After years of development, testing, and the participation of public health professionals across the United States, the accreditation process officially launched on September 14, 2011.

According to the PHAB [website](#), the goal of the voluntary national accreditation program is to improve and protect the health of the public by advancing the quality and performance of tribal, state, local, and territorial public health departments. PHAB's public health department accreditation process seeks to advance quality and performance within public health departments. Accreditation standards define the expectations for all public health departments that seek to become accredited. National public health department accreditation has been developed because of the desire to improve service, value, and accountability to stakeholders.

THE GOAL

To improve and protect the health of the public by advancing the quality and performance of tribal, state, local, and territorial public health departments.

BENEFITS OF ACCREDITATION

The accreditation process has numerous benefits for state health departments, including the following:

Accreditation strengthens external partnerships.

All state health departments must establish partnerships with external agencies and organizations to be successful. The accreditation process can lead to a deeper relationship with existing partners and identify new partners that can aid the work of public health, all of which improves the services and programs in which the department engages.

One state interviewed for this guide described how the requirement to engage tribal partners ensured that one program, which was about to launch a major strategic planning process, included tribal partners in the program. Another noted how accreditation helped create alignment between the state department and local departments.

Accreditation requires the creation of a quality improvement infrastructure and development of a performance management system.

The benefits of a performance management system are described in ASTHO's *Performance Management Leadership Guide*. Health departments that employ performance management systems and a quality improvement infrastructure become more efficient and effective organizations, ensuring the department maximizes its return on investment.

Accreditation increases credibility.

An accredited health department has undergone an independent review of its processes and procedures and received a stamp of approval. In one state health department, this translated into the legislature approving an increase in staff and budget. Several accredited health departments noted increased grant funding from private foundations and the federal government after accreditation.



A department director shared a story about trying to get additional staff to support its new strategic planning and accreditation efforts. Upon learning about the accreditation process, two legislators supported an increase of staff in the budget and it was approved. The director said that accreditation made the department “up its game and the quality of our work.”

Accreditation also improves morale. As a department director said:

“Accreditation has given staff and leadership a place to grow and improve. Accreditation is the greatest thing since sliced bread.”

An evaluation of the accreditation program presented in August 2016 by NORC at the University of Chicago and published in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) found that an overwhelming majority of accredited health departments strongly agreed or agreed that accreditation had the following benefits: stimulated quality and performance improvement opportunities within the health department, allowed the health department to better identify strengths and weaknesses, helped the health department document capacity to deliver the three core functions of public health (i.e., assessment, policy development, and assurance) and the 10 Essential Public Health Services, stimulated greater accountability and transparency within the health department, and improved the management processes used by the leadership team in the health department.¹

PHAB manages an ongoing evaluation process for accreditation, and has developed **online resources** describing the benefits and impact of accreditation through their Accreditation Impact series and Accreditation Works! series.

10 ESSENTIAL PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES AND THREE CORE PUBLIC HEALTH FUNCTIONS



1. Monitor health status to identify and solve community health problems.
2. Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community.
3. Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues.
4. Mobilize community partnerships and action to identify and solve health problems.
5. Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts.
6. Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.
7. Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of healthcare when otherwise unavailable.
8. Assure competent public and personal healthcare workforce.
9. Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.
10. Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.

ACCREDITATION CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Leaders preparing their departments for accreditation can anticipate the following challenges:

Accreditation is a long-term process. The initial accreditation preparation process can take two to three years due to the energy and resources needed to ensure key documents are in place, including a state health assessment, state health improvement plan, strategic plan, workforce development plan, quality improvement plan, performance management system, emergency operations plan, and organizational branding strategy. Long-term commitment is key. Leadership must stay the course and make the process fun, engaging, and a true benefit to all involved.

Accreditation is resource intensive. There is an accreditation fee, but the greatest cost is the staff time necessary to meet accreditation requirements. Funding sources used for accreditation activities vary. Some departments use general fund dollars. Many use funds from the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant. The CDC document, **CDC Funding Opportunity Announcements and Inclusion of Accreditation-Related Language**, describes the accreditation-related language in CDC FOAs and provides a table with links to FOAs that include accreditation-related language. The accreditation-related language is generally found in new CDC FOAs and the table is updated periodically to reflect new FOAs.

State support of local health departments (LHDs) can be critical and make a big difference in the ability of LHDs to work towards accreditation. To meet this challenge, the Oklahoma State Department of Health has set an annual measure to have counties accredited. The California Department of Public Health established the **California Performance Improvement Managers Network**, which hosts a variety of phone conferences and posts shared materials online to support local accreditation efforts. The Florida Department of Health worked in concert with all of its local health departments to become the first integrated system to be accredited.



HOW TO BEGIN THE ACCREDITATION JOURNEY

The journey to accreditation is all about discovery.

This is the ultimate opportunity for health department leaders to look at their organization and seek opportunities for improvement. This is likely to be the most successful and expansive quality improvement project that health department leaders will conduct in their careers.

Some leaders have said they felt like their departments must be perfect before applying for accreditation. However, the accreditation process is not about seeking perfection, it is about improving existing services through a continuous quality improvement process that continues long after accreditation status is achieved.

The PHAB website offers tips for getting started:



Appoint an accreditation coordinator. Utilize PHAB's accreditation coordinator guide for selecting the person who will fill this critical role. This position should report to the highest level possible. In some departments the position reports to the director.



Review PHAB's online orientation to public health department accreditation.



Review the documentation requirements for the measures. Begin to collect and organize documentation that meets the requirements. Review PHAB's accreditation readiness checklists with your leadership team and staff.



Begin or refine work on major plans, including the state health assessment, state health improvement plan, and strategic plan. The department must also have a quality improvement plan, performance management system, workforce development plan, organizational branding strategy, and emergency operations plan.

As a leader, you can also take steps to ensure a successful accreditation journey by serving as a point of contact and clearly setting internal and external expectations for the health agency:

Secure commitment to accreditation from your governing body and your executive team.

Design a communication strategy to use for department staff, external partners, the governing body, and elected officials. The strategy should showcase and highlight the steps to accreditation and the departmental improvements made during the process.

Clearly communicate the expectation with other leaders within the department that sets accreditation as top priority and identify resources that support accreditation activities and initiatives. Provide input and play a role in the development and roll-out of an accreditation plan for the agency.

Determine the optimal structure to identify opportunities for improvement and collect documents that provide evidence for meeting the PHAB measures. Some departments assign cross-agency teams with leads responsible for each of the 12 domains.

A lead accreditation team should be formed and composed of executives, managers, supervisors, and line staff. This team will make key decisions regarding the accreditation process, tracking timelines, and setting policies.

POST-ACCREDITATION

More and more departments are becoming accredited. After accreditation, your leadership role is critical to hold the gains and sustain momentum. The first step is to celebrate the achievement of accreditation. Some departments add a sentence to their logo announcing their accreditation status, and others have utilized the PHAB accreditation logo on their website and in email signatures. Some departments have maintained key parts of the structure that led to accreditation, such as domain teams, to continue cross-department improvements. This is critical to ongoing staff engagement, as PHAB requires an annual report and reaccreditation occurs every five years. Keeping staff on board and committed to the work of accreditation also ensure that all key agency plans are living parts of the daily work within the health department.

Reaccreditation will not be a repeat of the initial process. In keeping with the emphasis on continuous quality improvement and performance management, PHAB expects reaccreditation will include an array of the following:

- Demonstration of continued conformity with the initial standards and measures.
- Conformance with the latest standards. For example, compared to Version 1.0, Version 1.5 has new elements addressing topics such as health equity, public health ethics, and organizational branding.
- Demonstration of how quality improvement projects and the performance management system have affected department operations.
- Report on progress toward addressing population health outcomes the accredited health department has chosen to monitor, such as outcomes identified in the state health improvement plan.



When addressing staff, external partners, governing bodies, and elected officials, consider using compelling messaging, such as:

I believe accreditation will greatly benefit our department and I am committed to moving ahead.

The nonprofit Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) launched national public health accreditation in September 2011.

My public health peers created a voluntary process to improve the quality of services delivered to the community.

Accreditation uses continuous quality improvement to make us a more efficient and effective organization.

The accreditation process fosters more efficient use of resources to support the state's public health priorities.

The evidence shows that accreditation improves staff morale and increases departmental credibility and transparency.

The accreditation process is a transformational journey which continues long after the initial accreditation, with annual reports and reaccreditation every five years.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Seven Steps of Public Health Department Accreditation

<http://www.phaboard.org/accreditation-process/seven-steps-of-public-healthaccreditation/>

The Guide to National Public Health Department Initial Accreditation

<http://www.phaboard.org/accreditation-process/guide-to-national-public-health-accreditation/>

PHAB Standards and Measures

<http://www.phaboard.org/accreditation-process/public-health-department-standards-and-measures/>

PHAB Supplemental Accreditation Materials

<http://www.phaboard.org/accreditation-process/accreditation-materials/>

Crosswalk Between Recommendations from The Community Guide and Health Department Accreditation Standards

<http://www.thecommunityguide.org/uses/community-guide-phab-crosswalk-version-1.pdf>

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials: Accreditation and Performance Improvement Homepage

<http://www.astho.org/Programs/Accreditation-and-Performance/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Voluntary Accreditation for Public Health Departments

<http://www.cdc.gov/stltpublichealth/accreditation/>

REFERENCE

1. Kronstadt J, Meit M, Siegfried A, Nicolaus T, Bender K, Corso L. Evaluating the Impact of National Public Health Department Accreditation – United States, 2016. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2016; 65:803–806. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6531a3>. Accessed 1-11-2017.

