

Indiana Association of Local Boards of Health

Accreditation

In order to improve the health of the public, the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) is developing a national voluntary accreditation program for state, local, territorial and tribal public health departments. The goal of the accreditation program is to improve and protect the health of every community by advancing the quality and performance of public health departments.

What is the purpose of the national accreditation program?

The goal of the national public health accreditation program is to improve and protect the health of the public by advancing the quality and performance of *all* health departments in the country – state, local, territorial and tribal. Accreditation will drive public health departments to continuously improve the quality of the services they deliver to the community.

Why now?

Public health departments play a critical, but often unrecognized role in promoting and preserving the health of people in communities across the country. Despite the important role health departments play in our communities, there has not been a national system for ensuring their accountability and quality – until now. Other community services and organizations have seen the value of accreditation, such as schools, daycare centers, police departments and hospitals. Now, there is an opportunity for public health departments to measure their performance, get recognition for their accomplishments and demonstrate accountability within their communities. Also, as the public health field faces increasing challenges from epidemics and disaster preparedness, it is more important than ever that systems are in place to ensure their effectiveness and quality of services.

What is the timeline?

By 2015, PHAB aims to have 60 percent of the U.S. population served by an accredited public health department.

Who is eligible to apply for national accreditation?

The governmental entity that has the primary statutory or legal responsibility for public health in a state, territory, tribe or at the local level is eligible for accreditation. This includes state health departments, territorial health departments, local (city and county) health departments and tribal health departments.

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What is the difference between public health accreditation and public health credentialing?

Both credentialing and accreditation efforts are active in the public health community right now. Accreditation is a voluntary program that measures the degree to which state, local, tribal and territorial public health departments meet nationally recognized standards and measures. Credentialing is a process that measures the knowledge and skills of individuals with graduate level degrees in public health.

Will there be certain staff credentials (for example, training, certifications, licenses, etc.) that will be required for a health department to have in order to receive accreditation status?

The standards, as they are currently drafted, do not require specific credentials or licenses to achieve PHAB accreditation. The health department however, will need to demonstrate that it has the capacity to meet the standards and provide the public health services.

When will national accreditation start for health departments?

Program development is currently underway at PHAB, with an expected launch of the national program in 2011. PHAB's Committees and Workgroups developed the standards and measures, the procedures to assess health departments and a research and evaluation plan. The standards, measures and processes were formally adopted for the national beta test and will be revisited following the completion of the beta test.

How long will a health department be accredited for?

A five-year accreditation cycle has been adopted by the PHAB Board.

What are the benefits of accreditation?

Several states have accreditation programs for local health departments, and PHAB continues to learn from their experiences. The following benefits have been realized by accredited local health departments, and PHAB surmises that states receiving accreditation status also stand to enjoy these benefits:

- The accreditation assessment process provides valuable, measurable feedback to health departments on their strengths and areas for improvement.
- Engaging in the accreditation process provides an opportunity for health departments to learn quality and performance improvement techniques that are applicable to multiple programs.
- Gaining accreditation status has resulted in increased credibility among elected officials, governing bodies and the public.
- The recognition of excellence brought on by meeting accreditation standards has positively impacted staff morale and enhanced the visibility of the health departments.
- Accreditation is a means of demonstrating accountability to elected officials and the community as a whole.

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Is there a connection between accreditation and improved public health outcomes?

The ultimate goal of an accreditation program is to improve the public's health through improved quality and performance of public health departments. To date, however, there is little research supporting the outcomes correlated with public health interventions. Whether improved health outcomes are realized through implementation of quality improvement processes is a primary research question, and one that PHAB's Research & Evaluation Committee will pursue as the accreditation program is developed and implemented.

How can I prepare for accreditation?

Public health departments can start preparing for accreditation now, before the launch of the national program in 2011. We encourage you to:

Review your agency's practices against the standards and measures.

- Engage in quality improvement efforts by learning, educating your colleagues, and building internal capacity for ongoing quality improvement.
- Develop and/or improve your department's community health assessment, community health improvement plan, and strategic plan.
- Review accreditation materials and share your feedback with us. Your input will be collected and considered in revisions to the program.
- Start working on three specific documents that will help to prepare your agency for accreditation. The following will be required for health departments to complete for the national accreditation process, so it's not too early to start on them now:
- A community health assessment, in which a health department assesses the health needs in the community, the health status of the community and plans its services through the second document.
- A community health improvement plan, which maps out exactly what a health department is going to do as it works with partners to improve the health status of its jurisdiction.
- A strategic plan for the health department, which indicates a health department's service priorities and how it plans to accomplish its strategic goals.

What resources are available to help me?

ASTHO provides tools, resources, and technical assistance to state and territorial health agencies working on quality improvement and accreditation preparation. ASTHO's Accreditation and Performance Improvement Guide provides a framework for assessing readiness for accreditation, identifies opportunities and strategies for performance improvement, provides information and resources designed to assist health departments prepare for applications for accreditation, and suggests ways to continue performance improvement between accreditation cycles.

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NACCHO offers tools and resources for local health departments interested in accreditation preparation and quality improvement. A good starting point is to determine the degree to which your local health department is meeting the Operational Definition standards and metrics. NACCHO offers an agency self-assessment tool for the Operational Definition metrics to score the health departments capacity in meeting each indicator. NACCHO also provides information on strategies for smaller local health departments (such as joint applications and regionalization).

NALBOH recognizes that governing bodies, boards of health and public health governmental entities are becoming more interested and engaged in quality improvement activities, and are eager to play a significant role in the accreditation process. Currently, NALBOH is supporting several quality improvement activities.

How much does accreditation cost?

PHAB has convened a Fees and Incentives Workgroup to determine application fees, with an underlying principle of developing a fee structure that does not present financial barriers to health departments wishing to participate in the accreditation process.

How much does it cost to prepare for accreditation?

These costs have not yet been quantified. Health departments participating in the beta test will document the resources required to undertake the process, which will inform the national accreditation program. Additionally, many local health departments (LHDs) accredited by state-based programs attest that the cost of preparing is worth it. LHDs have received funding based on accreditation status, have noted areas where cost efficiencies can be gained based on self-assessment results or site visit reports, and noted many other benefits that justify the cost.

What are the incentives to participate?

The Exploring Accreditation Project Steering Committee determined that all incentives should be uniformly positive, supporting public health departments in seeking accreditation and achieving high standards. PHAB will devote significant attention to securing specific, tangible incentives and benefits for those who participate. A workgroup will address the need for robust incentives for participation. Further, research on incentives conducted at the University of North Carolina is guiding PHAB's work, including a survey of potential applicants on categories of incentives including:

- Financial incentives (for accredited agencies and for agencies applying for accreditation)
- Grants administration
- Grants application
- Infrastructure and quality improvement
- Technical assistance and training

Source: The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) (www.phaboard.org)