

► DIRECT FROM CDC ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BRANCH



LCDR Justin Gerding, MPH, REHS



Valeria P. Carlson, MPH, CHES



Robin Wilcox, MPA

Public Health Department Accreditation and Environmental Public Health: Sustaining the Collaboration

Editor’s Note: NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature a column from the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In this column, EHSB and guest authors from across CDC will highlight a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health. EHSB’s objective is to strengthen the role of state, local, tribal, and national environmental health programs and professionals to anticipate, identify, and respond to adverse environmental exposures and the consequences of these exposures for human health.

The conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of CDC.

LCDR Justin Gerding is an environmental health officer in the CDC National Center for Environmental Health, and Valeria P. Carlson is a public health analyst in the CDC Office for State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Support. Robin Wilcox is the chief program officer of the Public Health Accreditation Board.

The first national voluntary accreditation program for public health departments was launched in September 2011 (Public Health Accreditation Board [PHAB], 2011a). The first cohort of public health departments was accredited in February 2013. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation cofunded the national accreditation program’s development and startup. The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) manages the program and grants accredited status. PHAB evaluates applicants’ conformity with established standards and measures.

The standards and measures are divided into 12 domains: one domain for each of the 10 essential public health services, plus domains for public health department administration and public health governance (PHAB, 2011b). The overall goal of accreditation is to advance the quality and performance of public health departments.

Collaboration between PHAB and its critical partners and constituencies, including the CDC National Center for Environmental Health and other environmental public health (EPH) professionals, has been an important aspect of developing the new program. Key recommendations from early

collaboration between PHAB and EPH professionals included consistently and accurately using EPH terminology; including EPH expertise when site review teams are selected; identifying areas for EPH documentation in PHAB submissions; and continual, consistent EPH participation throughout the accreditation process (Blake, Corso, & Bender, 2011).

EPH is expected to be a major contributor to the accreditation process and many PHAB standards and measures specifically involve EPH. PHAB site visitors expect to see evidence of EPH activities even if a public health department does not have statutory EPH authority and responsibilities. To gain insight on EPH contributions during accreditation processes, we reached out to recently accredited public health departments and PHAB site visitors who have EPH expertise. These discussions revealed several common themes and lessons learned as follows:

- EPH plays a significant role with Domain 2 (investigations), Domain 5 (policies and plans, including emergency preparedness), and Domain 6 (enforcement). EPH contributions are not limited to these domains, however. For example, one recently accredited health department was able to demonstrate conformity with Domain 3 measures by providing documentation of culturally and linguistically appropriate education via Spanish-language food handlers’ courses.
- EPH involvement is not limited only to domains where EPH documentation will be submitted. EPH staff can contribute to the review of other documentation and provide an EPH perspective across all 12 domains, which can lead to a more collaborative approach to the accreditation process.

- EPH can have an active role in prerequisite activities such as community health assessment, community health improvement planning, and strategic planning. Several recently accredited health departments relied heavily on EPH indicators and participation in the community health assessment and improvement planning process. EPH participation in health department strategic planning is largely dependent on whether EPH is housed within a separate agency or agencies.
- Documentation is the key to a successful accreditation process. Staff at several recently accredited health departments commented on the importance of updated policies and plans to demonstrate conformity with PHAB measures. EPH contributions to documentation, such as inspection and investigation reports, work particularly well for accreditation purposes because they are typically recorded on official templates with signature and date. Staff at one recently accredited health department pointed out that documentation of a routine activity, such as inspecting food vendors at a large public event, is just as important as documenting an investigation.
- Incorporating the 10 essential public health services and the related 10 essential environmental public health services into EPH department operations may increase accreditation readiness. Use of the Environmental Public Health Performance Standards (EnvPHPS) is one way EPH departments can assess their level of essential service incorporation. More information about EnvPHPS can be found at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/envphps/ (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).
- EPH services are not always provided by the health department itself. It is important to identify all agencies contributing to the EPH system (e.g., environmental quality or agriculture departments) for participation in the accreditation process.
- Pursuing accreditation can lead to institutionalized changes in policies and procedures. Accreditation team members at one recently accredited health department shared their experience with determining whether their policies were “best” or just “existing.” At another recently accredited health department, staff found that changes in animal bite reporting prompted by the

accreditation process have led to improved analysis of bite trends by time and location, resulting in more effectively targeted preventive measures across the jurisdiction.

- Involvement with accreditation can lead to fundamental changes in the way EPH conducts business both at the health department and within the public health system. As an example, one recently accredited health department was able to identify and close an information-sharing gap between the health department and another department that manages most EPH activities in the jurisdiction. Collaboration during the accreditation process resulted in the two departments working more closely together to meet the community’s EPH needs.

EPH professionals fulfill key roles in the accreditation process, both by participating in the pursuit of accreditation and by serving as PHAB site visitors. All health department staff and site visitors who responded to the request to participate in the development of this article found their accreditation efforts to be rewarding and beneficial to both the health department and the community. One health department’s accreditation coordinator commented, “What we’ve gotten back has been not only the accreditation and recognition of that status but also improvements in processes, procedures, and service to the community.” Another remarked, “In the big picture, it’s more about continuing to improve services.”

EPH professionals are strongly encouraged to support collaboration through engaging in the accreditation process or serving as a site visitor. To learn more about accreditation and how EPH can contribute, visit the PHAB Web site (www.phaboard.org). 🗣️

Corresponding Author: LCDR Justin Gerding, Environmental Health Officer, Environmental Health Services Branch, Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services, National Center for Environmental Health, CDC, 4770 Buford Highway NE, MS F-58, Atlanta, GA 30341. E-mail: jgerding@cdc.gov.

References

Blake, R., Corso, L., & Bender, K. (2011). Public health department accreditation and environmental public health: A logical collaboration. *Journal of Environmental Health, 74*(3), 28–30.

The First 11 Health Departments to Receive Five-Year Public Health Accreditation Board Accredited Status

- Comanche County Health Department (Lawton, OK)
- Franklin County Health Department (Frankfort, KY)
- Livingston County Department of Health (Mt. Morris, NY)
- Northern Kentucky Independent District Health Department (Edgewood, KY)
- Oklahoma City-County Health Department (Oklahoma City, OK)
- Oklahoma State Department of Health (Oklahoma City, OK)
- Spokane Regional Health District (Spokane, WA)
- The Public Health Authority of Cabarrus County, Inc., d/b/a Cabarrus Health Alliance (Kannapolis, NC)
- Three Rivers District Health Department (Owenton, KY)
- Washington State Department of Health (Olympia, WA)
- West Allis Health Department (West Allis, WI)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). *Environmental public health performance standards: Improving service in communities*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Docs/Factsheets/EnvPHPerformanceStandards_factsheet.pdf

Public Health Accreditation Board. (2011a). *Guide to national public health department accreditation* (version 1.0). Retrieved from <http://www.phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/PHAB-Guide-to-National-Public-Health-Department-Accreditation-Version-1.0.pdf>

Public Health Accreditation Board. (2011b). *Standards and measures* (version 1.0). Retrieved from <http://www.phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/PHAB-Standards-and-Measures-Version-1.0.pdf>