

Role of Environmental Health Programs in Public Health Accreditation



Introduction

The Public Health Accreditation Board's (PHAB's) national voluntary accreditation program advances the quality and performance of public health departments.¹ The accreditation program measures health department performance against nationally recognized, practice-focused, and evidence-based standards. It documents the capacity of health departments to deliver the three core functions of public health and the Ten Essential Public Health Services.

Environmental public health (EPH) is an important contributor to the accreditation process, and many PHAB standards and measures involve EPH.² The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) interviewed local health departments (LHDs) to learn about the steps they take and what types of EPH documentation they use in their accreditation processes. NACCHO sought to do the following:

- Gather information about how health departments perceive the connection between EPH programs and public health accreditation;
- Understand issues, successes, and challenges that local EPH programs have in contributing to the accreditation process; and
- Identify potential best practices and technical assistance needs to support local EPH programs in contributing to the accreditation process.*

Methods

From December 2014 to January 2015, NACCHO conducted key informant telephone interviews with five LHDs that were pursuing or had achieved public health accreditation. For the purpose of this assessment, LHDs were defined using NACCHO's National Profile of Local Health Departments (Profile) studies and PHAB's eligibility requirements.^{3,4} Selected LHDs were geographically diverse and included two from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Region 4 and one each from

HHS Region 3, HHS Region 5, and HHS Region 8.⁵ NACCHO identified potential participants that indicated they were pursuing accreditation through various mechanisms.

NACCHO developed key informant interview questions, which were organized into the following topics:

- General health department background;
- Public health accreditation status/background;
- Lessons learned;
- EPH documentation used to meet public health accreditation; and
- Recommendations for local EPH programs beginning the accreditation process.

Results

Overview of Respondents' Processes Used to Prepare for Accreditation

Health departments are required to submit documentation showing how they meet the PHAB standards and measures. The documentation process emphasizes three documents that have been identified as prerequisites for applying: community health assessment, community health improvement plan, and strategic plan. NACCHO asked respondents about EPH's involvement with these three activities conducted at their agency. A majority of the respondents stated their agency had engaged in or used the following processes or frameworks that contribute to community health improvement planning: Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP); Ten Essential Public Health Services; Environmental Public Health Performance Standards (EnvPHPS);⁶ Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE EH); or National Public Health Performance Standards (NPHPS). Respondents also stated that EPH was involved in the health department's strategic planning.

Respondents stated their agencies required EPH staff to participate in the agency's crosscutting accreditation team and that the teams met regularly to discuss accreditation and required documentation.

Lessons Learned

Respondents shared lessons learned while searching for documentation for accreditation. Such lessons include the following:

- Take time to learn and understand the PHAB Standards and Measures before applying;
- Identify and develop documentation as opportunities arise, date documentation, and develop a central repository to store future accreditation documentation;
- Document EPH processes that are considered institutional knowledge to help in times of turnover and for risk management purposes; and
- Create protocols to review and analyze surveillance data, which is an important part of accreditation documentation that will help with program assessments and improvements.

EPH Documentation Used to Meet Public Health Accreditation

The PHAB Standards and Measures comprise 12 domains. The first 10 address the Ten Essential Public Health Services; Domain 11 addresses management and administration; and Domain 12 addresses governance. NACCHO asked respondents about the types of EPH documentation that were used for the accreditation process. Respondents reported they submitted EPH documentation for some aspect of each domain, except for Domain 7: Promote Strategies to Improve Access to Health Care. The most common domains that respondents cited included

Domain 2: Investigate Health Problems and Environmental Public Health Hazards to Protect the Community; Domain 6: Enforce Public Health Laws; Domain 8: Maintain a Competent Public Health Workforce; and Domain 9: Evaluate and Continuously Improve Processes, Programs, and Interventions. NACCHO's Example Documentation Library website provides examples of EPH documentation.⁷

Best Practices & Recommendations

The interviews identified some best practices and processes that have helped respondents through the accreditation process and identified EPH resources (e.g., staff time and documentation) for accreditation. Such recommendations include the following:

- Read and understand PHAB's standards and measures and required documentation;
- Identify dedicated EPH staff and set clear schedules and expectations;
- Get early support and broad support from management/board;
- Ensure that an EPH representative is an integral member of the accreditation team;
- Review all available documents and select those that best fit the measure after group discussions;
- Identify back-up documentation early;
- Embrace continuous quality improvement and use knowledge from the accreditation process to become a more effective EPH program and agency overall; and
- Understand that timing, tools, and the accreditation coordinator's knowledge of EPH are critical for incorporating EPH into the accreditation process.

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References

1. More information about PHAB's voluntary program is available at <http://www.phaboard.org>.
2. http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/docs/jeh/2011/oct_accreditation.pdf
3. NACCHO's Profile study defines an LHD as "an administrative or service unit of local or state government concerned with health and carrying some responsibility for the health of a jurisdiction smaller than the state."
4. <http://www.phaboard.org/accreditation-overview/who-is-eligible/>
5. <http://www.hhs.gov/iea/regional/>
6. <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/activities/performance.html>
7. <http://www.naccho.org/topics/infrastructure/accreditation/exemplar/documentation.cfm>

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The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to be a leader, partner, catalyst, and voice with local health departments.

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