

The National Accreditation of the Delaware Division of Public Health

Paul Silverman, DrPH and Karyl Rattay, MD, MS

Achieving accreditation is a major milestone in any organization's life. The rigorous requirements and often multi-year process forces staff to re-examine almost every aspect of the organization with the goal of continuous improvement. In spring 2016 the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH) achieved national accreditation for the first time in its history, from the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB).

While such an achievement seems technical in nature, the overall outcome is that the people of Delaware will be better served by a continually improving public health agency. At this time, Delaware is the only accredited state health agency in the Mid-Atlantic Region (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Delaware is one of 19 state health departments to receive national public health agency accreditation, Governor Jack Markell, DHSS Secretary Rita Landgraf and Delaware Public Health (DPH) Director Dr. Karyl Rattay announced June 8, 2016.



What is public health accreditation?

Within its 2004 Futures Initiative,¹ the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified accreditation as a key strategy for strengthening public health infrastructure. PHAB was formed in 2007 as the non-profit entity to implement and oversee national public health department accreditation. Accreditation is voluntary and demonstrates the capacity of governmental public health agencies to deliver the Ten Essential Public Health Services.² PHAB standards grew from, and are organized by, these essential services that every public health agency should provide:

- Monitor health status to identify and solve community health problems;
- Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community;
- Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues;

- Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems;
- Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts;
- Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety;
- Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable;
- Assure a competent public and personal healthcare workforce;
- Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services; and
- Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.

Accreditation provides a means for a public health agency to identify performance improvement opportunities, enhance management, develop leadership, and strengthen relationships with community organizations. As a result of our efforts to achieve accreditation, DPH made a number of important improvements. These include the development of: a state Health Improvement Plan, a meaningful strategic plan, a performance management system, a formal quality improvement program, customer satisfaction surveys, and a workforce development plan.

Accreditation includes a site visit by three public health professionals. The site visit team that spent two days in Dover said DPH is “a state health department that is functioning at a high level of achievement as measured by the national PHAB standards. DPH is well-respected by community agencies and by other state departments and is a proven and trusted resource for the legislature. There is clear support and direction from the Department of Health and social services secretary for the Division’s needs and vision. Community partners praised the staff of the Division for being responsive even when requests are only peripherally related to DPH’s responsibilities.”³

The site visit team provided these thoughts about DPH’s greatest strengths:

- The strategic plan reflects the ability of the leadership team and DPH to focus limited resources for optimal impact on population health. The strategy maps utilized in the plan provide a useful visual tool for implementation and monitoring achievements.
- The administrative policies and procedures that have been developed provide excellent support for DPH to accomplish its work in an efficient manner.
- The support that DPH has created internally for developing, honing, and coordinating information and messages flowing out to the entire state appear to be a valuable and well utilized resource within the DPH.
- The culture of DPH appears to have changed over the past four to five years with a focus on evidence-based practices and the widespread involvement of senior managers in learning collaboratives, partnerships that include universities and community partners, and robust quality improvement projects.

The site visit team also provided thoughts on areas for improvement:

- There appear to be opportunities to increase involvement of the community at large to improve the health of their community through the work that DPH has begun in

several local areas. Of special note is the recent finalization of the DPH health equity guidebook that is used as a training tool and resource guide to empower communities as they work to improve their health. (To learn more about the guide visit <http://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/index.html>.)

- DPH has an opportunity to move forward in a joint effort with community partners in the next iteration of the state Health Improvement Plan. The groundwork appears to have been laid to hone the focus of the community partners so that they commit and develop ownership for a few key areas and concentrate community-wide resources to those focus areas.
- DPH should consider including descriptions of how qualitative data is analyzed and document the process for priority selection so that as plans are made for implementing interventions, there is a clear path between priority and intervention selection and the data that supports it.
- DPH is reviewing the above recommendations and will work to continually integrate them into daily work.

Accreditation means more accountability to the people DPH serves. It should provide confidence to the public and elected officials that their public health agency strives to improve and performs at a nationally recognized standard. For DPH employees, accreditation is verification that they should be proud of the agency for which they work.

For more information on Delaware's accreditation, call DPH's Office of Health and Risk Communication at 302-744-4704. For more information about the accreditation process, visit <http://www.phaboard.org>.

References

1. <http://www.cdc.gov/futures/>
2. Core Public Health Functions Steering Committee, fall 1994.
3. Public Health Accreditation Board final report (unpublished).

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