



What Is the Impact of State Laws and Policies on Public Health Departments Seeking Accreditation?

Advising states and communities on laws and obligations relevant to accreditation for state and local health departments

SUMMARY

In fall 2011, the [Public Health Accreditation Board](#)¹ began accepting applications for accreditation from state and local public health departments throughout the United States. To apply, the agencies must have strategic plans, community health assessments (priorities and goals developed with public input) and community improvement plans (specifying the agencies and organizations that will help fulfill those goals) in place. These prerequisites require time, resources, and commitment.

From 2011 to 2012, a team under the auspices of the [Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials](#) searched state and national databases for state laws and policies that require or encourage public health agencies to fulfill these prerequisites, to shed light on whether the laws and policies facilitate progress toward accreditation.

To gather in-depth information on the enforcement and impact of these laws and policies, and each state's preparations for accreditation, Edward Dauer, LLM, MPH, a professor at the University of Denver's Sturm College of Law; Diane Burkhardt, JD, a law librarian at the college; and Lee Thielen, MPA, a public health consultant in Fort Collins, Colo., conducted telephone interviews with 91 public health officials across all 50 states.

Lisa VanRaemdonck, MPH, MSW, executive director of the Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials, oversaw the project, assisted by an advisory board. (See the [Appendix](#) for a list of members.)

RWJF's Interest in the Field

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has set a goal that all U.S. citizens will be served by accredited public health agencies by 2015. Standards for accreditation have

¹ The Public Health Accreditation Board is jointly funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

been worked out through an extensive development process that began in 2004, funded by RWJF and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The team for this grant worked with other RWJF programs, such as the *Public Health Law Research* program and grantees at the North Carolina Institute of Public Health.

The Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials, the grantee for this project, is the administrative home for the Colorado Public Health Practice-Based Research Network, which is part of the *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Public Health Practice-Based Research Network* program.

Key Findings

Project staff reported these key findings:

- The 50 states have some 360 state and local laws, regulations, legislative resolutions, executive orders, policy decisions by agency directors, and performance contracts requiring a state or local health department to complete one or more of the prerequisites for accreditation.
- Some 24 states have a mandate requiring public health departments to fulfill one or more of the prerequisites, though states do not enforce all the mandates.
- Only a few state laws or regulations actually mention accreditation. However, almost all states are comfortable using existing public health authority to complete one or more of the accreditation requirements.
- The [National Public Health Improvement Initiative](#) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—especially the initiative’s funding for states to designate a performance improvement manager for public health—has spurred work that supports state and local accreditation.
- According to state officials, common barriers to progress in completing the prerequisites and applying for accreditation included:
 - Limited financial and staff resources
 - A need for training and education on accreditation and its prerequisites
 - Funding and program silos that prevent such cross-cutting work
- While the prerequisites can be a high hurdle on the path toward accreditation, numerous legal and administrative tools already in use can help state and local health departments get over them, the researchers concluded.

Key Results

The research team reported to RWJF that it produced:

- A searchable database on laws and policies related to public health accreditation in each state, along with a codebook explaining the variables and fields in the database (both available [online](#)).
- Two reports (available [online](#)):
 - One on overall findings from the project research, including those noted above
 - A second on the legal landscape, environment for accreditation, and barriers to completing the prerequisites in each state

Project staff distributed the reports to the officials they interviewed, the project's advisory board, and members of the Public Health Accreditation Board.

- The researchers also made presentations on their findings to:
 - The Public Health Accreditation Board, Washington, September 14, 2011
 - The Open Forum of the Community of Practice for Public Health Improvement, Alexandria, Va., December 12, 2011
 - The 2012 Keeneland Conference, sponsored by the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services and Systems Research, and the Public Health Practice-Based Research Networks National Coordinating Center, Lexington, Ky.,² April 17, 2012.

Lessons Learned

1. **When doing an extensive database search, hire a librarian.** Enlisting a legal librarian to work on the project was a key step, according to the project staff. “The librarian was able to develop appropriate search terms and provide expert guidance and perspective to the research team,” said consultant Lee Thielen.
2. **Combining personal interviews with database research provides strong results.** The telephone interviews conducted by Lee Thielen and Edward Dauer provided invaluable insight on the information gathered during the database searches. “This project would not have had as many practical and robust findings if we had used one of these two methods alone,” Thielen noted.

Funding

RWJF provided \$150,000 for this project from February 2011 to April 2012.

² *Public Health Services and Systems Research* and *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Public Health Practice-Based Research Network* are national programs of RWJF.

Afterward

Staff members at the Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials have submitted an article on the project and its findings to the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*. They may also seek funding to periodically update the information on each state's work toward accreditation.

Prepared by: Doug Hill

Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman and Molly McKaughan

Program Officer: Angela K. McGowan

Program Area: Public Health

Grant ID#: 68705

Project Director: Lisa VanRaemdonck (303) 861-4995; lisa@calpho.org

APPENDIX

Advisory Committee

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

Kaye Bender, PhD, RN, FAAN
President and CEO
Public Health Accreditation Board
Alexandria, Va.

Julia Joh Elligers, MPH
Program Manager
National Association of County and City
Health Officials
Washington, D.C.

James G. Hodge, Jr., JD, LLM
Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics
Arizona State University
Tempe, Ariz.

Julie Marshall, PhD
Department of Epidemiology

Colorado School of Public Health
Aurora, Colo.

Gene W. Matthews, JD
Gillings School of Global Public Health
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Glen P. Mays, MPH, PhD
Department of Health Services Management
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Ky.

James A. Pearsol, MEd
Chief Program Officer
Public Health Performance
Association of State and Territorial Health
Officials
Washington, D.C.

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An Examination of State Laws & Policies Regarding Public Health Agency Accreditation Prerequisites. Denver: Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials, 2012. Available [online](#).

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