

Introduction

The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) seeks to advance and transform public health practice by championing performance improvement, strong infrastructure, and innovation. Initial accreditation is awarded for five years and health departments are required to submit Annual Reports in between accreditation cycles (annually) to provide updates to PHAB on their continuing improvement journey.

This brief looks at data provided in the PHAB Annual Report Section II for initially accredited health departments (Cycle 1-4) related to quality improvement (QI). Data were generated from 316 PHAB accredited health departments' Annual Reports submitted between January 2015 and December 2021.

As part of the Annual Report process, health departments are instructed to provide information about their QI projects, including indicating the broad topic areas of those projects. Key findings from an analysis of quality improvement questions include:

- Programs (e.g., maternal and child health, immunization, etc.) are the most frequent focus area for QI projects.
 - Throughout each year following initial accreditation, the focus on programs for QI projects decreases.
 - The percentage of program related QI projects increased between 2020 and 2021; many of these program QI projects were related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The percentage of workforce related QI projects are stable throughout the four years following initial accreditation.
- Programs, other administrative/management, data, and workforce had the highest percentage of QI projects in 2021.
- The percentage of data related QI projects significantly decreased between 2020 and 2021.
- The percentage of health equity related QI projects increased between 2020 and 2021.

Findings

Quality improvement in public health is the use of a deliberate and defined improvement process which is focused on activities that are responsive to community needs and improving population health. It refers to a continuous and ongoing effort to achieve measurable improvements in the efficiency, effectiveness, performance, accountability, outcomes, and other indicators of quality in services or processes which achieve equity and improve the health of the community.¹

Quality improvement projects change the way health departments operate. As one professional from an accredited health department shared:

“During our pursuit of accreditation, we made a significant transformation by integrating continuous quality improvement (CQI) through most aspects of our department. Since accreditation, we have continued this transformation.”

¹ Public Health Accreditation Board acronyms & glossary of terms: Version 1.5. *PHABboard.org*. 2013. https://phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FINAL_PHAB-Acronyms-and-Glossary-of-Terms-Version-1.5.pdf

Table 1 demonstrates the percentage of quality improvement projects within topic areas. Percentages change throughout each cycle, or year accredited, based on what the health department identifies.

Quality improvement projects related to programs were the most frequent focus area every cycle and in 2021 (as seen in Table 2). These projects provide health departments with an opportunity to see their efforts in action, with results often possible within a short timeframe. QI successes provide motivation to continue with QI processes.

"Every vaccine clinic is an improvement cycle with performance metrics measured, analyzed and operations changed and improved. Every change in policy, COVID-19 case rates, or Health Officer Orders has required retooling of processes and optimization of resources based on the prior "cycle". In addition, we have continued to use Human Centered Design through multi-sector collaborations to address quality improvement in our COVID-19 response."

In recent years, public health has seen a rise in acknowledgement of racism as a public health crisis and devoted increased resources and effort to addressing health equity. The COVID-19 pandemic and attention to acts of violence have also increased awareness and brought an urgency to improve health equity efforts. During this time, PHAB has seen an increasing number of QI projects that focus on health equity. As one health department shared,

"The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for health equity by shining a light on health and healthcare disparities more than any other time in recent history. This emphasis facilitated our health department's progress in QI by fostering increased access to health equity trainings, specifically touching on racial disparities and COVID-19 mitigation efforts."

Table 1: Tracked Quality Improvement Project Focus Areas by Cycle in the Accreditation Process

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Cycle 4
Programs	72.65%	57.14%	66.20%	57.78%
Other administrative/management	36.75%	53.57%	46.48%	51.85%
Data	43.59%	38.39%	46.48%	47.41%
Workforce	41.03%	40.18%	40.14%	41.48%
Community engagement	37.61%	35.71%	43.66%	28.15%
Financial management	29.06%	26.79%	35.92%	28.15%
Health Equity	23.08%	22.32%	38.03%	32.59%
Other	22.22%	14.29%	21.83%	14.07%
Governance	8.55%	8.93%	14.08%	8.89%
Total by Cycle	117	112	142	135

Table 2 demonstrates the tracked QI project focus areas in 2020 and 2021. In 2021, programs, other administrative/management, and data were the most common focus areas. Table 2 also provides opportunity to evaluate changes in QI project focus area; between 2020 and 2021, data (decrease of 13.48%), programs (increase of 9.63%), and health equity (increase of 8.7%) had the highest percentage change.

Table 2: Tracked Quality Improvement Project Focus Areas in 2020 and 2021

	2020	2021
Programs	37.23%	46.86%
Other administrative/management	29.93%	32.0%
Data	48.91%	35.43%
Workforce	27.73%	33.71%
Community engagement	23.36%	31.43%
Financial management	18.98%	20.57%
Health Equity	20.44%	29.14%
Other	16.79	21.14%
Governance	8.03%	8.0%
Number of Health Departments	137	175

Looking Forward

As accredited health departments continue to implement QI processes, there will be opportunities to learn from their own work and share their successes and failing forward moments with others. PHAB will continue to support this work and encourage health departments to continue to develop and implement practices that help them serve their communities better. PHAB provides resources for QI support through our data portal, health department newsletter, and more. One health department shared:

"The feedback on the QI storyboard has been invaluable in shifting how we document QI projects to ensure we have a more meaningful storyboard to share across the department."

PHAB will continue to champion and support QI as a driver of public health transformation. Learn more at phaboard.org.