

## Pathways Recognition Program

### Pathways Overview

#### 1. How is Pathways different than accreditation?

Accreditation is a process to assess and recognize health departments' performance against a set of national standards. Pathways Recognition is a process for health departments not yet ready for accreditation, to be assessed and recognized against a subset of those national standards. Achievement of Initial Accreditation or Pathways Recognition provides assurance that the health department performs the Foundational Capabilities necessary to serve their community. Both programs support performance improvement efforts, strengthen infrastructure, and facilitate public health system transformation, including state-based improvement efforts. However, accreditation builds upon those Foundational Capabilities to hold health departments to a full set of national consensus standards for serving their communities.

While there are some common elements of the programs, there are also notable differences:

- Pathways Recognition is awarded at a point in time. Initial Accreditation and Reaccreditation status last for five years and recognize an ongoing commitment to performance improvement.
- A health department will be recognized for demonstrating the measures in the Pathways program, but that health department cannot call itself an accredited health department.
- The review process is similar across the two programs, but Initial Accreditation includes a site visit.
- Pathways includes a learning community with other health departments applying for Pathways at the same time.

#### 2. What are the benefits of completing Pathways?

- The Pathways Recognition program is designed to promote improvement of the health department's operations to better serve the community. Benefits include:
- Objective review of performance by an external entity on a subset of national standards,
- Identification of opportunities for improvement and facilitation of ongoing efforts to address those opportunities,
- Recognition for what the health department does to support accountability both internally and externally,
- Opportunity to engage with peer health departments.

Pathways will also help prepare a health department for Accreditation. Not only will a health department understand how to prepare documentation—and receive feedback from PHAB on their documentation—but because the Pathways measures are a subset of the Initial

Accreditation measures, they will already have completed a substantial portion of the work required for documentation submission for Initial Accreditation. If a health department applies for Initial Accreditation within two years of completing a track, the measures that were assessed as Fully or Largely Demonstrated will not be reviewed again; instead, those assessments will carry forward to accreditation. If a health department demonstrates all measures within a track and applies for accreditation within two years, there is a discount for the first two years' of the Accreditation Annual Services Fee, as described [here](#).

### **3. How did you select these measures for the Pathways program?**

When PHAB developed Version 2022 of the Standards & Measures, we identified measures that align with the Foundational Capabilities (FCs) in the [Foundational Public Health Services](#) framework. The FCs are the cross-cutting skills and capacities needed to support basic public health protections, programs, and activities key to ensuring community health, well-being and achieving equitable outcomes. Because the FCs are the infrastructure that supports all of the health departments' work, those 34 measures were selected for use as the requirements for the Pathways Recognition program.

### **4. Why are there two tracks? Can I do them both at the same time?**

The Pathways Recognition program was developed with two Tracks - or groupings - of measures to give health departments options as they embark on this part of their performance improvement journey. The Tracks (Services & Partnerships and Health Department Systems) each contain about half of the 34 Foundational Capability measures designated in Version 2022 of the Standards and Measures. The two-Track structure is intended to meet health departments at their level of readiness, allowing the department to decide whether to complete both Pathways Tracks simultaneously or separately.

### **5. What does it mean to be Pathways recognized?**

To receive recognition, health departments must demonstrate both Tracks, meaning that all measures in both Tracks must be scored either Fully or Largely Demonstrated. Recognized health departments receive a certificate, a plaque, and access to online resources specifically for recognized health departments. PHAB will publish the list of recognized health departments.

If a health department successfully demonstrates (i.e., is assessed as Fully or Largely Demonstrated on all Measures of the track) only one Track, it will receive a letter indicating its demonstration of either the Partnerships and Services Track or the Health Department Systems Track. If health departments apply for tracks one at a time, documentation for the second track must be submitted within two years of the letter indicating demonstration of the first track in order to be Recognized.

**6. How long does Pathways Recognition last? Does it expire?**

Recognition status is awarded at a point in time and only to health departments that have demonstrated both Track 1 and Track 2 of the Pathways Recognition program. When health departments communicate their status, they must do so while attaching the year. For example, ‘Well-being County Health Department, PHAB Pathways Recognized, 2023.’

**7. After I go through Pathways, will I need to start all over again with accreditation?**

No, you will be able to leverage the work you did for Pathways in your accreditation process. Because the Pathways Measures are identical to the ones in Initial Accreditation, you will have a better understanding of how to interpret the Measures and to provide documentation. Depending on the timing, you may be able to use the same documentation—or you may not even need to submit documentation for some Initial Accreditation measures.

A health department that applies for accreditation within two years of completing a track will not be re-reviewed for the Fully or Largely Demonstrated measures in that track. If the health department completes both tracks within two years of applying for accreditation, it will not be re-reviewed on any of the Fully or Largely Demonstrated Foundational Capabilities Measures. (If the health department applies for accreditation more than two years after being acknowledged for completing one Track or recognized for completing both Tracks, the health department will be reassessed on all measures.)

If a health department demonstrates all measures within a track and applies for accreditation within two years, there is a discount for the first two years’ of the Accreditation Annual Services Fee, as described [here](#). If a health department is recognized for demonstrating all measures in both tracks and applies for accreditation within two years, there is a larger discount for the first two years’ of the Accreditation Annual Services Fee.

**Pathways Process**

**8. Who is eligible for Pathways? Is there a minimum number of staff or population served to be eligible?**

All local, Tribal, and territorial health departments are eligible to apply for Pathways. There is no minimum—or maximum—number of staff a health department must have or not have to apply. Similarly, local, Tribal, and territorial health departments can apply for Pathways regardless of population-size served. Please see the Eligibility section of the [Policy](#) for more details.

State health departments are not eligible to apply for Pathways directly but may work to support local and Tribal health departments in their Pathways processes. Learn [more](#) about how PHAB can work with states to support Pathways throughout the public health system.

**9. How do I decide which track of Pathways I should pursue?**

The first step all health departments are required to complete before applying for Pathways (and accreditation) is the Readiness Assessment and pre-application training. Upon completing the Readiness Assessment, health departments will be provided feedback and a recommendation from PHAB staff on next steps for preparing for either Pathways or Accreditation. Ultimately the decision of which Track(s) to pursue is the health department's and should be based on the level of documentation to support conformity the health department has available for Track 1 (Services and Partnerships), Track 2 (Health Department Systems), or both.

**10. What is the learning community component? Is it required?**

While the learning community is not required, health departments pursuing Pathways are encouraged to participate. It is a chance to meet with other health departments going through the process, ask questions of each other, and learn from each other's experiences.

**11. How long does the process last from start to finish?**

The first step of the process is preparation. Health departments are encouraged to review the Standards & Measures and determine whether there are gaps that will take longer to address. For example, if the health department has never done a community health assessment or community health improvement plan, it may wish to work on those before proceeding. Below are key timelines for the process. How long it takes each health department to go through each step will depend on their level of readiness:

- 1 year from the time a health department pays its Readiness and Training fee to take the necessary trainings, complete the Readiness Assessment, and apply.
- 6 months from the time the application is approved to provide documentation in e-PHAB
- 90 days from the time the health department is notified of measures that are reopened to provide alternative documentation.

**12. How do I apply for Pathways Recognition?**

Once the health department has completed the Readiness and Training process, the health department can apply for Pathways Track 1, Track 2, or both tracks by submitting their application via e-PHAB. At the time the application is approved, the health department will be invoiced for their Pathways Recognition fee, and they will gain access to the appropriate modules in e-PHAB that allow the documentation submission process to begin.

**13. When can I apply for Pathways Recognition?**

A health department must first complete the Readiness and Training process, including all required trainings and the Readiness Assessment. After that has been completed, the health department can apply at any time. However, PHAB will only review and accept applications at three points in the year: February 28, June 30, and November 30. This is to allow us to form cohorts of health departments to participate in the learning community.

#### **14. Are there pre-requisites for applying to the Pathways Recognition?**

Before applying for Pathways Recognition, health departments are required to register in e-PHAB and complete the Readiness Assessment and pre-application trainings. The findings and feedback offered by PHAB through the Readiness Assessment should help prospective Pathways applicants identify gaps. These gaps will ideally be addressed before the department moves forward in their Pathways journey to create the greatest opportunity for successful completion of the program.

There are not specific pre-requisites for applying to Pathways outside of the Readiness Assessment and pre-application trainings, (i.e., PHAB does not require health departments to submit sample documents, plans, etc.)

#### **15. What happens if the Director or Coordinator transition during the process?**

The Director and Coordinator are important roles and serve as the primary points of contact between PHAB and the health department during the Pathways Recognition process. However, a team-based approach to Pathways is highly recommended to facilitate buy-in among all staff and to build continuity and sustainability of Pathways-related work. With this approach, should a key role like the Director or Coordinator transition during the process, another staff member should be prepared to step in, at least temporarily, to avoid derailing the health department's progress.

If the Director or Coordinator should transition during the process, the health department should notify PHAB of the change. It is important to communicate changes right away to prevent a lapse in communications between PHAB and the health department and make sure the new Director and/or Coordinator has the support to continue the process.

#### **16. Are there any specific technology considerations for applying for Pathways Recognition?**

Health departments interested in pursuing Pathways Recognition should minimally have access to computers with internet connection speeds that allow for participation in required trainings, the Readiness Assessment, learning community activities, and to upload required documentation to e-PHAB. While not required, health departments may also find it helpful to establish a centralized and accessible documentation storage and organization system on their internal network, intranet, or other shared space that staff can access while working to gather documentation.

Per the [Standards and Measures for Pathways Recognition](#), all documentation must be uploaded to e-PHAB in a combined PDF file, so health departments will also need to have access to software programs that allow for the compilation of files into one PDF.

Outside of these minimum technological requirements, PHAB does not require health departments to have or purchase specific systems, software programs, or other technologies to pursue Pathways Recognition. Where 'systems' are referenced in the Standards and Measures, it is up to the health department to decide the format and type of systems used. For example, the requirement for an organizational performance management system does not refer to a specific software program or system, but rather that the health department has a systematic process in place for establishing targets and monitoring progress on performance toward achieving those targets. This could be through an enterprise software program, a Microsoft Excel file the department develops internally, or something entirely different.

**17. Are Annual Reports required after receiving Pathways Recognition?**

Annual Reports are not a required element of the Pathways Recognition program.

**18. Who does the department contact with process or measure interpretation questions before we apply?**

Questions about the Pathways Recognition process or interpretation of requirements outlined in the Standards and Measures can be sent to [askphab@phaboard.org](mailto:askphab@phaboard.org).

**19. How much does Pathways cost?**

PHAB reviews its fees annually and health departments should check the [Fees](#) page on our website for the latest information. The fees for the Pathways Recognition Program support the review of the health department against Foundational Capabilities Measures, as well as participation in a learning community with other applicants. Prior to applying for either Pathways or Initial Accreditation, health departments will pay the Readiness and Training fee of \$1,299. If they apply for either program within a year, they will receive a \$500 credit towards the fee for Accreditation or for Pathways. The current fee for each Pathways track is \$3,050. Health departments applying to both tracks would pay \$6,100.