

Health Department Accreditation: Strengthening the Foundation for Public Health Emergency Preparedness

During public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, health departments are a community's lifeline for providing the range of services, information, and guidance that can protect the public's health and potentially save many lives. Response efforts require organizations to monitor community health, communicate effectively, build partnerships, and address environmental health hazards. Communities depend on these functions, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As **Cuyahoga County (OH) Health Commissioner Terry Allan** explains: "Americans should view health departments as a utility, like water or electricity. People have a right to expect water to flow from their faucets when they're turned on and the lights to go on when they flip the switch. In the same way, public health is an essential service and trusted resource for everyone in the United States. That's a sacred responsibility."

The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) [Standards and Measures](#) include specific preparedness requirements to ensure a health department's ability to appropriately respond during public health emergencies, such as:

- Timely investigations of health problems and environmental public health hazards (*Standard 2.1*)
- Containment/mitigation of health problems and environmental public health hazards (*Standard 2.2*)
- Access to laboratory and epidemiological/environmental public health expertise and capacity to investigate and contain/mitigate public health problems and environmental public health hazards (*Standard 2.3*)
- Urgent and non-urgent communications, including risk communications plan (*Standard 2.4 and Measure 3.2.4*)
- All hazards emergency operations plan (*Standard 5.4*)

PHAB standards have substantial [alignment](#) with the CDC's [Public Health Preparedness Capabilities](#) and state health department accreditation has been used as an indicator of preparedness in the [National Health Security Preparedness Index](#) and the national [Ready or Not report](#).

Accredited Health Departments in Action

A case study about **Florida's** response to [Zika](#) virus showed that "PHAB accreditation bolstered the Department's efforts and actions." Coordinated state and county preparations for accreditation helped identify opportunities to strengthen an integrated surveillance system. Partnerships with the health care system and other community organizations enabled them to provide health information and testing in hard-to-reach and underserved populations across the state.

PHAB accreditation also enhanced the Zika response by the **Houston Department of Health and Human Services (TX)**. Acting on its accreditation [self-](#)

[assessment](#), the department ramped up its communications and engagement with culturally diverse communities and launched an initiative that included a partnership with five refugee resettlement organizations working in the city. The health department worked with those organizations to include Zika education and prevention activities in their services.

"We all want to serve our community. This has given us a chance to show when we are needed most we'll be here in full force." - [Jen Rombalski](#), La Crosse County Health Department (WI)

The **Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB)** is the national accrediting body that assesses state, local, Tribal, territorial, and U.S. Army health departments against a set of national standards. There are approximately 300 accredited health departments in 45 states plus the District of Columbia. To read more about PHAB, visit www.phaboard.org. Research has documented that accreditation has strengthened health departments and the communities they serve in areas such as: Accountability; Partnerships; Resources; Quality Improvement; and Workforce. For more on the impact of accreditation, see www.tinyurl.com/PHABImpact.

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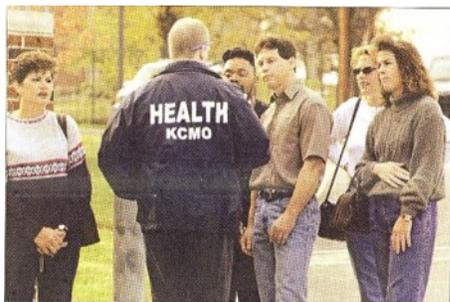


Photo courtesy Kansas City (MO) Health Department, via the Associated Press.

Accredited health departments have highlighted how preparing for accreditation helped them strengthen the tools needed in a response effort. For example, the **Connecticut Department of**

Public Health noted that “the agency’s focus on achieving accreditation has helped to instill a [continuous quality improvement](#) lens on our daily work.” In particular, the state laboratory has integrated quality improvement into their operations. Similarly, the **North Central Public Health District (OR)** conducted a quality improvement project [to reduce lab errors](#) and the **New York State Department of Health** launched a performance improvement initiative with local health departments in that state, which resulted in reduced timelines for [communicable disease investigations](#). Additionally,

Clermont County Public Health (OH) explains how accreditation motivated them to improve [external communications](#).

Accreditation has advanced [partnerships](#) with health care providers and other multi-sector partners, which are critical in responding to emergencies. In a [survey of health departments](#) four years after they are accredited, approximately two-thirds of respondents report that since accreditation their health department has strengthened their relationship with key partners in other sectors, including health care, education, and social services. In addition to the steps that health departments may take as they prepare for accreditation, the accreditation status itself may help solidify these partnerships and enhance standing in the community.

“As an emergency response agency, we are now accredited as [are] our fire, police and 911. This allows us to help the public understand public health is part of public safety.” - Accredited Health Department

A Beacon of Light

In these challenging times, communities look to their public health leaders to provide needed support. An excellent example of this emerged during the COVID-19 response when a **Columbus, Ohio**, retailer launched its [“Not All Heroes Wear Capes”](#) T-shirt campaign honoring everyday individuals, and specifically calling out the great work of the PHAB-accredited **Ohio Department of Health** Director Dr. Amy Acton, whom they describe as a “voice of reason and a beacon of light for those of us looking for ways to act.”

Through national standards for public health departments, **PHAB** has created a roadmap for how health departments can promote health and well-being in their communities every day—and especially in times of public health emergencies.

Further Reading

- More information about accreditation available at www.phaboard.org.
- An overview of studies related to the impact of accreditation available at www.phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/PHAB-Value-and-Impact-Revisions-2.20.20.pdf.
- Stories from accredited health departments about how *Accreditation Works!* available at www.phaboard.org/accreditation-works/.

Public Health Accreditation Board

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