

Celebrating 10 Years of PHAB Accreditation

Washington State Department of Health

Staff size: 2800

Population served: 7.8 million

Washington State Department of Health (WSDOH) has a history of measuring itself against public health standards. The department originally assessed themselves and their Local Health Jurisdictions (LHJs) against a set of home-grown standards to improve our public health systems, programs, and processes. Later, WSDOH participated in a multi-state collaborative to apply a common set of public health standards that became the precursor to current PHAB Standards. Throughout those processes, the department believed that holding themselves to the higher standard of public health shows their commitment to continuous quality improvement and helps meet their community's needs as effectively as possible. PHAB accreditation demonstrates accountability and credibility to the community, partners, and decision-makers.



Accreditation helped examine, standardize, and improve procedures and practices.

The foundation that accreditation has laid – commitment to continuous quality improvement, a focus on equity, strong communication and partnership – served WSDOH well during the COVID-19 pandemic. The department has been able to quickly form innovative partnerships with business and community partners across the state that improved reach and impact within and across communities, particularly underserved and disenfranchised communities. WSDOH has been restructured with a focus on equity, innovation, and engagement, and this has become the foundation for all initiative, programs, and services for the department. Accreditation standards lay the foundation for infrastructure, programs, and policy for the health department.

Workforce development for the public health workforce has been, and continues to be, a problem for WSDOH and the LHJs. Previous assessments and workforce development plans identified gaps that the agency could not address. Since the pandemic, additional resources have been identified for workforce development within WSDOH and across LHJ partners, and the department received a large CDC grant to build and expand public health workforce across the state. Accreditation helped identify existing gaps, but also increased the department's readiness to apply for the CDC grant and prepared them to successfully compete for funding.

Success: Focus on equity.

Accreditation has encouraged and maintained WSDOH's focus on equity over the ten years. Early in their accreditation journey, the department looked for a few examples of where equity was considered in a program or policy. Now the department considers equity across all efforts. As their transformational plan states, **"By ensuring equity, fairness, and justice principles are embedded in our activities, we will seek impactful and measurable solutions to often complex and historically rooted issues that are preventing equitable access to health and health care alike."**

This consistent and growing focus on equity is leading WSDOH to:

- Engage with partners and communities who have experienced systemic and cultural oppression,
- Ensure our policies, plans and programs incorporate environmental justice, and
- Create a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Accreditation prompted the department to think early and often about ways to embed principles of equity in their work. Past leadership issued an equity statement, and the department began talking about racism as a health issue. The COVID-19 pandemic rooted equity concepts in action as WSDOH approached communities to identify needs and gaps in COVID-19 response. This experience shapes much of the department's work today and is foundational to the transformation strategies the department is implementing. WSDOH embeds equity, innovation, and engagement in everything the department does.

Advice: Accreditation should be the foundation of your organization.

Accreditation is most meaningful when it becomes the foundation for how your organization functions, according to WSDOH. The standards can be a roadmap of what to pay attention to and how to develop your organization. Engaging all parts of your organization in learning and using the standards helps embed them in your processes and programs, making them much easier to maintain and to cyclically improve. Applying is hard work; to realize the greatest benefit from accreditation takes ongoing leadership commitment and support.

Tool: Power BI and a new transformational plan.

Employee participation in performance management systems has been key to success for WSDOH. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed inequities and the fragility of the state's public health workforce. In response, WSDOH developed a new strategic plan – a Transformational Plan – to drive dramatic change in the way the department does work. To support and promote internal adoption and measure impact, the department developed a feature board utilizing Power BI to measure and monitor how programs and initiatives drive specific transformations, and how well operational systems (like funding and staffing levels) keep up.

Each transformational initiative will include employee engagement in the development of the initiative and its measurements, and a Results Based Accountability (RBA) scorecard created for it.