

Public Health Accreditation:

The Ventura County experience from the Lab's perspective.

Part 1- the Pre-analytic phase

June 14, 2014, Ventura County Public Health (VCPH) announced that it had achieved 5-year national accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB). VCPH is the first public health department in California to earn this important distinction.

The national accreditation program, jointly supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, sets standards against which the nation's more than 3,000 governmental public health departments can continuously improve the quality of their services and performance. To receive accreditation, VCPH underwent a voluntary rigorous, multi-faceted, peer-reviewed assessment process to ensure it meets or exceeds a set of quality standards and measures.

The standards and measures are grouped into twelve domains:

Domain 1: Assess

Domain 2: Investigate

Domain 3: Inform & Educate

Domain 5: Community Engagement

Domain 6: Policies and Plans

Domain 7: Access to Care

Domain 8: Workforce

Domain 9: Quality Improvement

Domain 10: Evidence –Based Practices

Domain 11: Administration & Management

Domain 12: Governance

Before embarking on our accreditation journey, VCPH management facilitated a number of discussions and team-building exercises designed to get management-level staff to examine their individual programs, to think about where their programs fit into the 12 domains and, most importantly, how their programs interact with other programs across domains. Some programs cut across domains and we had to decide which elements of programs to choose to represent us as meeting the quality standards and measures.

Domain 2 has specific mention of Laboratory capacity:

DOMAIN 2: Investigate health problems and environmental public health hazards to protect the community

Standard 2.1: Conduct Timely Investigations of Health Problems and Environmental Public Health Hazards

Standard 2.2: Contain/Mitigate Health Problems and Environmental Public Health Hazards

Standard 2.3: Ensure Access to Laboratory and Epidemiologic/Environmental Public Health Expertise and Capacity to Investigate and Contain/Mitigate Public Health Problems and Environmental Public Health Hazards

Standard 2.4: Maintain a Plan with Policies and Procedures for Urgent and Non-Urgent Communications

The laboratory director, the communicable disease manager and the department's epidemiologist formed a team to take lead responsibility for Domain 2. We held monthly meetings and divided up the standards among ourselves and sorted through documents, memoranda, policies and procedures that would be supportive evidence of our efforts. We critiqued our own efforts and took our peer input back to re-work our approach. When we had it as good as we thought it could be, we submitted our information to a steering committee, whose job it was to look at the global accreditation package and ensure that we were submitting a broad representation of our department's efforts. The Steering Committee gave us valuable feedback that allowed us to improve our presentation. We had a few "forest for the trees" moments when we realized WE knew what we were presenting, so isn't it obvious to everyone? The steering committee helped us tweak our information to make it clear and pertinent.

Many of us were asked to serve as resource or technical advisors to the team leads for other domains, and most of us were involved in doing external critiques of domain information in areas we weren't familiar, primarily to provide an "outsider" perspective. I personally worked with eight of the 12 domain teams, and quickly grew to appreciate the value and contribution that "other" departments brought to the Public Health effort.

One of our best assets and a very wise decision on our part was to assign one person as caretaker and coordinator of the accreditation process. This person performed the herculean task of receiving the innumerable PDF's, screen-shots, videos and narratives that supported each domain and the appropriate standard, rode herd on the domain teams and kept track of the constant updating and flex in the overall application process. This person had the primary responsibility as the PHAB contact. Once she submitted the application, it was her responsibility to respond to questions generated by PHAB. But that's another story.....

Coming up: Part 2; The Analytic Phase