



**Building a Comprehensive Research Agenda:  
Potential Research Questions for Accreditation**

**May 2011**

Following the recommendations from the Exploring Accreditation project, the Public Health Accreditation Board is interested in encouraging research to develop the science base for accreditation and systems change in public health. The PHAB Research & Evaluation Committee, charged with this task, has developed the following initial preliminary set of research questions, organized according to the logic model developed by the Research and Evaluation Committee (attached). These questions should not be construed to assume that the Research and Evaluation Committee, the PHAB Board of Directors, nor the PHAB staff has questions regarding the potential benefits of accreditation. Rather, this draft research agenda is being developed to form a framework around which research which does not currently exist can be focused as an effort to improve and strengthen the accreditation process.

**INPUTS**

Characteristics Related to Achievement of Accreditation

- How do characteristics of non-accredited health departments differ from those of accredited health departments?
  - Are there differences in characteristics of leadership, governance, structure, budget, workforce, etc. between accredited and non-accredited health departments?
  - What impact did the federal infrastructure grants have on the recipient health department's likelihood to achieve accreditation?
  - What is the impact of other grants targeted towards accreditation, for example NACCHO grants for community health improvement plans, on health department operations and ability to obtain accreditation?
- What characteristics of tribal health departments make them more or less likely to apply for or successfully achieve accreditation?
- What are the characteristics (knowledge/skills/background) of a successful accreditation coordinator?

### Facilitators/Barriers to Seeking Accreditation

- What are the barriers to health department participation in accreditation?
  - Are there barriers to health department participation in accreditation real versus perceived?
- How do applicants for voluntary accreditation differ from non-applicants?
  - What factors are the strongest predictors for participation in a voluntary accreditation program? For example, do differences in leadership, governance, structure, budget and workforce influence participation?
- Does the existence of dedicated “core” or infrastructure funding for LHDs make a difference in the interest/ability in seeking accreditation?
  - Are health departments with categorical funding (but more limited infrastructure funding) less likely to apply for and successfully achieve accreditation?
- How is accreditation funded by health departments seeking it?
  - What role do foundations and other non-governmental sources play in supporting accreditation efforts by health departments?
- What characteristics of tribal health departments make them more or less likely to seek accreditation?

### Preparation for Accreditation

- What health department preparation activities for accreditation improve readiness for accreditation and successfully achieving accreditation?
- Are jurisdictions that have engaged in broader systems initiatives (e.g. NPHPSP, MAPP, SHIP) better positioned to seek and attain accreditation?
- Are health departments which emphasize emergency preparedness and readiness (e.g. Project Public Health Ready) better positioned to seek and attain accreditation?
- Are health departments with well developed quality improvement systems better prepared to seek and attain accreditation?
- Are local health departments more likely to seek accreditation if surrounding health departments are seeking it or have attained it?

## **STRATEGIES**

### Technical Assistance

- What supports do state, tribal, and local health departments, as well as other entities such as their governing bodies need to prepare for accreditation?
- Does preparation for accreditation encourage the adoption of evidence based and best practices?

### State Role in Accreditation

- How can coordination of accreditation activities at the state and local levels be most effective (e.g., state and local participation at the same time; state participation before local or vice versa; full local statewide participation in a coordinated manner)?
  - Does governance structure/typology of the state matter when addressing this question?
- How might state health departments support (or hinder) local health department participation in the accreditation program?
- What role does equivalency (recognition nationally of state or regional accreditation programs) play in building a national accreditation system?
  - Does it contribute to or create challenges for the development of a national system of accredited health departments?
  - Do the states with existing accreditation programs, some of which have been incubators for innovation, continue to explore new innovations?
- Does governance structure/typology matter?
  - Are the answers to these questions different for centralized versus decentralized systems?

### Incentives

- Are incentives for health departments to participate in the voluntary national accreditation program effective?
  - Which incentives for participation are most effective? (This includes PHAB-provided incentives as well as those provided by other organizations).
- What are the potentially different incentives for state, tribal, and local health department participation?
- What role would/could states play in providing incentives for their LHDs' participation in accreditation?
- What role could Indian Health Service, as well as other tribal entities, play in providing incentives to encourage/facilitate tribal health department's participation in accreditation?

## **OUTPUTS/PROCESS**

### Standards and Measures

- Do the PHAB standards capture what is most meaningful for evaluating the performance of health departments? For example, do the standards adequately address the role of governance in health departments?
- Do the PHAB standards adequately capture the critical work of health departments,
- Does accreditation paradoxically divert attention away from important health department activities?
- Are there additional accreditation standards that are missing?
- Are there additional accreditation standards which could be omitted?

- How is the bar determining whether accreditation has been achieved set most appropriately?
  - Has the bar been set too high? Too low? How can we tell whether the bar is set at the right level?

### Costs

- What are the full costs of accreditation?
  - What are the costs of preparing for accreditation and participating in the accreditation assessment process?
  - What are the costs of performance improvement to meet standards and are they part of the costs of accreditation?
  - What are the costs for improving performance after accreditation?
  - What are the costs associated with maintaining accreditation?

### Benefits of Accreditation

- Does accreditation promote or hinder the role of a health department in building a public health system?
  - Does accreditation reinforce that building the public health system is an important role, or does it cause health department leadership and staff to focus efforts internally, away from systems building?
- What are the best methods to determine if the national accreditation program demonstrated value to health departments, and what are the benefits?
- What are the best methods to determine if the national accreditation program demonstrated value to the public and policy makers, and what are the benefits?
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- To what extent does accreditation have value for programmatic areas within the health department?
- To what extent does accreditation have value for federal programmatic initiatives?
- Does accreditation benefit exceed cost?
- Does accreditation impact the performance of departments that have not gone through accreditation?

### Assessment Process - Self-Assessment and Site Visit

- To what extent does the self-assessment process predict the assessment review process?
  - What are the most beneficial methods to conduct the self-assessment process?
- To what extent does the site visit add value to the accreditation process?
- Are there any other parties that should be included in the site visit process?

### Robustness of the Accreditation Model

- Does the PHAB accreditation review and assessment process account sufficiently for contextual differences among health departments seeking accreditation (e.g. limited budget, unfunded mandates, limited political will, different governance structures, or other factors outside health department control)?
- Are state or local standards better suited for tribes seeking accreditation?

## **SHORT TERM OUTCOMES**

### Health Department Operations and Performance

- Does accreditation influence or change how health departments use their resources?
  - Does accreditation drive health departments to create new positions or change existing ones?
- Does accreditation increase the consistency of health departments' activities nationally?
  - Does consistency result in higher performing health departments?
- Do accredited health departments have greater accountability?
- How does accreditation affect health department workforce?
  - Does accreditation influence morale, productivity, workforce retention/satisfaction, achievement of competencies, and seeking advanced degrees?
- Does accreditation produce tangible benefits for health departments undertaking accreditation? (corollary to some questions above)?
- Does accreditation enhance progress in achieving the health department strategic plan? The state/community health improvement plan?
- Does accreditation influence progress in achieving Healthy People objectives, GPRA, or other federal benchmarks?
- Does accreditation influence the relationship between local health departments and other system partners, for example governing entities?
- Are intermediate measures of health department performance improved by accreditation?
- Does accreditation result in improved performance of health departments undertaking accreditation, or extend to all health departments in general
  - Does accreditation lead to strengthening of the broader public health community and health departments generally (floats all boats)?
- Does accreditation lead to improved health department performance, and ultimately to improved public health?
- Are health departments that collaborate with schools of public health (e.g., Academic Health Department programs) more likely to achieve accreditation or meet certain standards?
- What impact does accreditation have on tribal health departments?

### Infrastructure Resources and Other Support

- Do accredited health departments strengthen their financial status (or other domains)?
- Does accreditation improve capacity and performance of health departments (as measured by some of the following examples)?
  - Is there improved support of accredited health departments from elected officials?

- Are there greater resources made available to health departments, including in-kind contributions, by applying for accreditation? Achieving accreditation?
- Does the adoption of national standards for accreditation result in funding changes for health departments generally?
  - Does this depend upon where the accreditation bar is set?

### Quality Improvement

- Does accreditation help build the evidence base for quality improvement in public health departments?
- Does accreditation encourage the adoption of best practices?
- What is the relationship between accreditation and quality improvement in terms of impacting health department performance: do they act together, or do health departments pursue them independently?
- Is quality improvement more likely to be present in the operations of an accredited health department versus a non-accredited health department?
- Why are accreditation or quality improvement approaches successful in some health departments (or programs within them) and not others?

### Accreditation Program Outcomes

- What are the best metrics to determine health department advances in level of performance?
  - Are the NPHPS viable for measuring advances in level of performance?
- Does PHAB accreditation operate as intended to promote quality improvement?
- Are some essential services more affected by accreditation than others, and if so, why?

### National and State Programs

- Are there any differences between outcomes achieved by a national accreditation program versus the existing state programs?
- Is there a differential level of achievement among health departments from states with existing accreditation programs undertaking PHAB accreditation?

### Maintenance of Accreditation

- Does maintenance of accreditation influence uptake of quality improvement within the health department?
- Is performance maintained (or improved?) by accredited health departments between cycles of accreditation?

## LONG TERM OUTCOMES

### Health Departments

- Does accreditation enhance progress in achieving the health department strategic plan? The state/community health improvement plan?
- Does accreditation result in greater political support for accredited health departments?
- Do accredited health departments have greater community visibility as a result of accreditation?
- Does accreditation catalyze changes in health department activities, responsibilities, or structure at the state and local level (e.g. regionalization or shift of responsibilities)?
- Are there any differences between outcomes achieved by accredited health departments versus health departments that do other types of performance improvement activities (e.g., National Public Health Performance Standards Program; Baldrige, etc.)?

### Health Outcomes

- Does health department accreditation have an impact on health outcomes?
- If pursuit of accreditation leads to sharing of services between health departments in order to apply for accreditation, what is the impact on health outcomes and health services?
- Are some health outcomes more readily influenced by health department accreditation?
- Does accreditation lead to improved health department performance, and ultimately to improved public health?
- Does public health system change influence health outcomes?
- Are the improvements in health from accreditation ethically distributed across the population served by accredited health departments?
- Does accreditation enhance progress in achieving Healthy People objectives, GPRA, or other federal benchmarks? (*also in short term outcomes*)

### Accreditation Program

- What are the unintended consequences of health department accreditation?
- Are there any differences between outcomes achieved by a national program versus the existing state programs? (*also in short term outcomes*)
- What roles do practitioners, partners, consumers, and others play in influencing the accreditation process and its effect on health department performance?
- Is health department accreditation more effective than public health system accreditation?
- Is the impact of accreditation altered by whether a national or state (equivalent) process is pursued?
- Is the impact of accreditation altered by whether it is voluntary or mandatory?
- Is the impact of accreditation altered by whether it is pursued statewide, and whether the state and locals both/all seek accreditation in a coordinated fashion?

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# Public Health Agency Accreditation System Implementation

