

# NALBOH NEWSBRIEF

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## Boards of Health Have Important Role in Accreditation

by Jerry King

Most local boards of health have heard about accreditation for health departments. The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) has been at work for more than 2 years creating a nationwide program for voluntary accreditation of state, local, and tribal health departments. With funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, several leading national public health associations, including NALBOH, collaborated to create the accreditation board. The first health departments in the nation are expected to begin applying for accreditation in 2011 and 2012.

In Indiana, many local health departments (LHDs) have taken important first steps to prepare for eventual accreditation. Approximately half of the state's LHDs have conducted Public Health System Quality Improvement Project (PHSQIP) assessments and strategies. Others are preparing to conduct community health assessments and community health improvement plans (two large requirements for accreditation) and some are starting to review whether they are able to document that they follow standard agency policies and

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procedures. Moreover, we hear frequent reports that local boards of health are asking health officers what steps are planned to begin their departments' preparation for accreditation. In Indiana we could see some LHDs begin to apply in 2012 and 2013.

That all bodes well for public health in Indiana. One objective of the national accreditation program is that by establishing uniform standards based on public health's Ten Essential Services, we will begin to see a higher common denominator among health departments across the nation and in Indiana. Whether LHDs are large and well-resourced or very small, the accreditation framework gives LHD leadership and boards a very useful way to talk to local elected officials about the work that LHDs do in their communities and the resources they require to do that work.

As boards of health begin to think about accreditation, they should become familiar with the very first sections of the assessment that are about the governing aspects of the LHD. The accreditation process seeks to ensure that boards of health—whether they are governing or advisory boards—take up their important functions thoughtfully and diligently. As a result, accreditation standards include things such as whether the local board ensures that policies and procedures are in place that support effective agency and financial management and whether it is knowledgeable of public health services that are legally required.

Seeking accreditation is definitely a demanding and time-consuming commitment, but those who have experienced accreditation in states where it already exists attest that it brings benefits worth the effort in terms of staff performance and morale and better informed local elected officials. One element for a successful outcome will be that boards of health take their role seriously with their health officers and LHD leadership.

*Jerry King is Executive Director of the Indiana Public Health Association.*

For technical assistance with accreditation issues, please contact Tricia Valasek, NALBOH Sr. Project Director – Public Health Priorities, at (419) 353-7714 or [tricia@nalboh.org](mailto:tricia@nalboh.org).

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