

Accreditation Provides Opportunity to Deliver Higher Standard of Public Health Service in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rican communities value their quality of life, and they expect quality services from the health department. The Puerto Rico Department of Health is using public health accreditation as an opportunity to evaluate and improve its public health services.

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory located in the northeastern Caribbean. The Puerto Rican government is structured similarly to states: there is a central government with executive power exercised by the governor, a house and senate, and a judicial system directed by a supreme court. There are eight senatorial districts, 40 representative districts (similar to U.S. counties), and 78 municipalities. Known as *la isla del encanto* (“the island of enchantment”), Puerto Rico is mostly mountainous with large coastal areas in the north and south. The most populous cities are located near coastal areas, with the central municipalities making up large rural areas.¹

With a population of nearly 3.6 million, the Puerto Rico Department of Health (PRDOH) provides both healthcare and public health services in all regions of the island. Public health services include vital statistics, vaccinations for women, infants, and children, senior services, environmental health, public health education, and prevention services (e.g., nutrition, violence prevention, and commercial tobacco cessation). The Puerto Rico Health Insurance Administration (ASES) is responsible for the administration of services provided to eligible members of the Puerto Rico Healthcare Plan (PHRP). Under PHRP’s Integrated Care Service Model, ASES negotiates and contracts providers for the coverage of physical and mental health necessities of the medically indigent population of Puerto Rico. Healthcare services include full-service hospitals, emergency centers, and free clinics.

In 2011, PRDOH established a quality improvement program (QIP) to identify potential quality improvement activities, such as staff trainings on basic quality improvement techniques. The QIP developed a performance management system for PRDOH, and discussions about accreditation emerged with department leadership. PRDOH began working on the Public Health Accreditation Board’s (PHAB) prerequisites for public health accreditation the following year. Public health accreditation is a voluntary process that seeks to advance performance and improve quality within local, state, tribal, and territorial health departments. PHAB is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization that serves as the accrediting body of governmental public health agencies.

Accreditation provides health agencies with an opportunity to evaluate their work based on a national set of standards and increase the overall quality of their services. PRDOH is using the accreditation process to assess its agency performance, identify opportunities for improvement, find strategies to sustain its continuity of services, develop leadership, and strengthen important relationships in the community. The department aims to be accredited by January 2017. Funds from CDC’s National Public Health Improvement Initiative (NPHII) have supported its accreditation activities.

Steps Taken:

¹ Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration. “About Puerto Rico.” Available at: <http://prfaa.pr.gov/puertoricond2.asp>. Accessed 1-20-2016.

Case Study



- The PRDOH administration shared information regarding public health accreditation and its benefits with Puerto Rico's government leadership, including the health secretary and governor's office.
- PRDOH also shared information with staff via email, banners, and other marketing campaigns to raise awareness about public health accreditation and the department's interest in improving performance. Department leadership provided links to the PHAB website, as well as links to other accreditation and public health performance information.
- Some staff may have initially been resistant to pursuing accreditation, which is common when something new is occurring, but there was increased buy-in as staff learned more about the accreditation process. Leadership support for accreditation also had a positive impact on staff's perceptions and attitudes about accreditation.
- Once there was a greater awareness across the department about accreditation, PRDOH partnered with ASTHO to facilitate and conduct an organizational self-assessment (OSA) based on the PHAB standards and measures. The standards and measures set the expectations for health departments that seek accreditation. In preparation for the accreditation process, a health department may complete an OSA through a review of the standards and measures to identify strengths and uncover gaps in agency performance. An OSA is an effective tool that can enable a department to identify policies and procedures that need to be developed or documents that are out of date.
- The accreditation core team (ACT) developed OSA guidelines and documentation on documentation management and storage, communication strategies, and development of the accreditation organizational support. It collaborated on the development of the OSA with the accreditation coordinator (AC), who coordinates the implementation of the OSA Plan.
- The AC oversees the completion of accreditation process requirements. At PRDOH, the AC played an integral role in developing and completing the OSA. The AC coordinated all aspects of the OSA, including communicating with the ACT, conducting communication activities, coordinating informatics support during the process, organizing and managing continuous meetings with team leaders, informing the team on the accreditation timeline, and serving as the point-of-contact for PHAB, ASTHO, and other organizations that collaborate on the process. Along with coordinating the OSA, the AC involves PRDOH employees in the accreditation process, and provides and explains the OSA guidelines and documentation.
- PRDOH staff were organized into 12 domain teams based on their position, experience, and expertise. Initially, it was challenging to get staff involvement due to competing priorities across the department. However, once PRDOH administrators and staff had a greater understanding of accreditation and the opportunity to improve policies, procedures and service coordination, they became more motivated to participate.
- PRDOH convened planning meetings with 19 leaders from across the agency, and held meetings on a biweekly basis. During these meetings, the ACT, led by the AC, explained guidelines to the leaders and reviewed the domains' OSA activities.
- The OSA results highlighted strengths and areas for improvement. Staff learned that PRDOH was addressing some measures more effectively than anticipated, and others less well. Because the OSA process was collaborative, staff are invested in improving performance.
- With the OSA complete, PRDOH staff are in the process of gathering documentation to demonstrate competency based on the PHAB standards and measures. They have also initiated

Case Study



two of the three prerequisites for accreditation, including a community health assessment and community health improvement plan.

- PRDOH has completed a strategic plan, and continues to seek funds to sustain accreditation readiness efforts and achieve its performance goals.

Lessons Learned:

- People value their work, and they want to perform well. Once staff had a clear understanding of accreditation and how it could help improve the overall work of PRDOH, people became motivated to participate and were eager to do more.
- Leadership involvement is key to successfully completing accreditation requirements. PRDOH involved leadership at multiple levels and at different stages of the process. Administrators and staff understood the department's vision and the value of accreditation.
- Using a collaborative process to conduct the OSA helps program areas learn from one another. Staff were engaged in the process and were eager to learn and listen to others as they reported their experiences evaluating each domain. Program areas offered recommendations and ideas to help others, increasing collaboration and communication.
- Engage a core team to support the AC. The PRDOH ACT has helped ensure progress toward accreditation by assisting with the development of working tools, ensuring staff involvement in the process, and communicating accreditation efforts across PRDOH.
- Use the resources available to guide accreditation readiness efforts. PRDOH accessed resources and guides from ASTHO and PHAB, such as the PHAB Accreditation Coordinator Handbook, PHAB Standards and Measures guidelines, and ASTHO's Developing a State Health Improvement Plan: Guidance and Resources, as well as ASTHO's State Health Assessment Guidance and Resources. Additionally, ASTHO provided technical assistance during the OSA that helped engage PRDOH staff in the process. Finally, both ASTHO and PHAB provided presentations and information to PRDOH staff, making the process less complicated.

For more information:

Eddy Sanchez Hernandez, MP, PPL
Assistant Secretary
Assistant Secretariat for Planning and Development
Puerto Rico Department of Health
Email: eddysanchez@salud.pr.gov

Alexandra Barton,
Analyst, Performance and Quality
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Email: abarton@astho.org