

### Quality Improvement Tools Facilitate Improvements to the Grant Application Process for the Kentucky Department for Public Health

*By focusing on the challenges agency staff faced when applying for grant funding, the Quality Improvement Committee was able to standardize and improve the process.*

The Kentucky Department for Public Health (KDPH) relies on federal grant funding for slightly more than half its budget. The agency does not have a grant writing department; each program area writes its own grant applications. When writing grants, the staff has relied on colleagues and previous applications to provide required information about the health department and state demographics. The KDPH Quality Improvement Committee recognized that this process would benefit from streamlining. By providing staff with the tools and information needed to complete the basic information required on many grant applications, staff were able to spend more time focused on strengthening the programmatic components of the applications.

#### Steps Taken:

- As part of QI training, the KDPH Quality Improvement Committee determined that there was significant opportunity for the committee to tackle the grant application process.
- In a survey of KDPH staff conducted by the Quality Improvement Committee, respondents identified potential areas of improvement for the grant application process.
  - Forty-one staff members responded to the survey (~10% of the agency's full-time employees). While the percentage of responses from full time employees was low, respondents were primarily agency staff whose positions required grant writing.
  - Twenty-three respondents (56.1%) were either dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with the current grants process.
  - Twenty-four respondents (59%) said that they had trouble finding the information that they needed.
  - Thirty-four respondents (82%) indicated that access to a grants checklist would be helpful to the grant writing process.
  - Thirty-one respondents (75%) indicated that having access to KDPH personnel information (including number of employees, indirect costs, and fringe benefits) would be helpful.
  - Twenty-nine respondents (70.7%) relied on information from previously submitted grant applications when completing new applications.
- A subset of the Quality Improvement Committee, the Grants Process QI Team, was created to focus on this project. The team was comprised of representatives with grant writing

- 56.1% of KDPH staff surveyed was either dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with the grants process.
- After conducting a quality improvement process, 91.3% of respondents are either highly satisfied or satisfied with the new grants process.
- KDPH staff has since compiled a list of 30 general projects that could be addressed through QI.

responsibility from each of KDPH's seven divisions and the commissioner's office. The team used its first two meetings to identify hurdles in the grant application process. Janie Cambron, the KDPH performance improvement manager, then categorized each of the hurdles, helping the team create a cause and effect diagram.

- For its next meeting, the team discussed which of the factors could be most easily influenced and/or improved.
- The team honed in on the opportunity to improve the process by maintaining all documentation required for grant applications in one central location and ensuring that all documents would be updated at least annually and more often if necessary.

### Results:

- Based on the results of the Grants Process QI Team's efforts, the team decided to create a page on the KDPH intranet focused solely on the grants process.
- The new grants process page provides easy and up-to-date access to information commonly required for grant applications, from the department's DUNS number to the population demographics of the state.
- The team also developed clear guidelines for updating the site. The team is charged with reviewing and updating the site annually. If a document needs to be updated mid-year, the KDPH administration and finance team is responsible for changing the site.
- **This central repository allows staff to focus primarily on writing the content of grant applications, planning programs and strategizing effective ways to see results**, rather than on gathering the basic information about the health department and the state required in almost every application.
- KDPH's Commissioner's office conducted a follow-up survey to determine what impact these changes have had on grant writing. Similar to the first survey, respondents were primarily those involved in writing the agency's grants.
  - Twenty-three staff members (~5% of the agency's full-time employees) responded to this follow-up survey.
  - Twenty-one respondents (91.3%) are currently either highly satisfied or satisfied with the current grants process.
  - Thirteen respondents (56%) said that the new grants intranet site has been helpful.
  - Sixteen respondents (69.5%) of respondents would like training to further improve grant writing skills.

### Lessons Learned:

- The workgroup utilized the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) quality improvement cycle in a short timeframe. The entire project was completed within four months, which allowed the committee to brainstorm solutions and implement changes quickly. As a result, the workgroup felt energized and enthusiastic about the quality improvement process, as tangible benefits were seen in such a short timeframe.

- It is very important to have the right people at the table. In this case, individuals who were heavily involved in grant writing were a part of the planning process.
- It would have been helpful to the process if more staff members, including those with less responsibility for grant writing, had provided feedback on the pre- and post-surveys. Response rates for internal surveys at KDPH can sometimes be low, and additional input would have helped guide the process.

### Next Steps:

- Survey respondents indicated that a formal grant training process would be helpful. As noted above, the agency does not have a grant writing department; each program area writes its own grant applications. The department plans to conduct a training assessment to determine the viability of a grant writing workshop with employees.
- There is also discussion around instituting an electronic grants process. Currently, each version of a grant application document is either walked or emailed to those working on the application. While the department doesn't have funding to fully automate the process, a vision for future improvement would include an automated, web-based grants revision and clearance process.
- Finally, based on this experience, KDPH staff has realized that their daily processes can be improved with QI frameworks. They have since compiled a list of 30 general quality improvement projects from across the agency that could be addressed. The QI team is working to train and empower staff to take ownership of the direction and flow of the processes and institute QI thinking throughout the organization.

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