

Making the Best of a Bad Situation: One LHD's Restructuring for Sustainability and Accreditation

NACCHO's Accreditation Preparation & Quality Improvement (QI) Webinar Series
Thursday, May 26, 2011 3:00PM EST

In May 2011, NACCHO hosted a webinar entitled "Making the Best of a Bad Situation: One LHD's Restructuring for Sustainability and Accreditation." This webinar featured the executive director of the Kane County Health Department in Illinois. The presenter talked about using the PHAB standards to reorganize his agency as a result of significant budget cuts.

The questions below were posed during the webinar.

Are copies or templates for the job descriptions available?

Yes, the job descriptions and templates are available and they can be requested from Paul Kuehnert by e-mailing him at KuehnertPaul@co.kane.il.us. They will be posted once final.

Would this restructuring have been possible if you had not already been involved with community partners, specifically the federally qualified health centers (FQHCs)?

Paul Kuehnert acknowledged that the answer to this question probably varies depending on the location. In Kane County, however, the county board would not have supported the health department discontinuing services if they were not able to offer an alternative or solution for the community members affected. Kuehnert is aware of other counties where services have been simply discontinued, but this was never a consideration for KCHD. KCHD was very fortunate in that over the past five years, they have set a deliberate focus upon developing partnerships. They are also fortunate that their community is home to several FQHCs or hospitals that provide low-income services.

What are the educational level requirements for the positions and in what ways are you assisting your staff to achieve them?

Kane County Health Department now divides its staff into three different categories of positions. The exempt positions and level three positions now require master's degrees, level two positions now require bachelor's degrees, and level one positions require high school diplomas or associate's degrees. The biggest change has been at the second level with respect to their public health nurses. During the last nursing shortage, the agency had relaxed its standards to not require BSN-prepared nurses. Now that the agency has brought back the necessity of a bachelor's degree, they are working with the six staff who do not have a BSN to continue their education. These employees have four years to attain the necessary degrees and they are provided with the options of using the county's tuition reimbursement program for college courses or the same program for continuing education courses related to the differences in the BSN and RN curricula. Additionally, across the entire agency, CEU requirements have been added for NIMS training and other certifications.

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How did you get support for accreditation from your governing board? And how have you kept their interest during this crisis?

Initially, Kuehnert gained buy-in from his board by involving them in the strategic planning process. He focused on the notion that they can't afford to be just a "good" health department, they need to be a "great" health department. In order to get to this level of excellence, Kuehnert reasoned, his agency would need benchmarks and measures to follow – thus the board agreed and decided to pursue the national accreditation standards. The board still supports this goal despite the financial crisis because Kuehnert has shown them how the agency transition aligns with these national standards and benchmarks. Moving forward, the board is interested in the costs of accreditation and how they compare to the benefits. Kuehnert hopes that by integrating the PHAB standards into his organization's model, he can sustain his board's commitment.

How have you managed staff discomfort or fear since the transition and the job cuts?

Kuehnert admits that managing staff morale has been a very difficult part of this transition. Overall, he sees communication between staff and management as the most important component of his strategy. He has created many opportunities for an open dialog between staff and management, ensured that management are accessible to frontline staff, and organized monthly all-staff meetings for discussion. He has been fortunate to have several organizational development consultants donate time to assisting with facilitation of this communication. These consultants helped gain input from staff around what they see as "critical" for the agency and management to focus on. It appears that this open dialogue is paying off for the agency - employee satisfaction surveys have revealed slight increases in staff morale over time.

What first step would you recommend for those beginning journeys like this?

Kuehnert and his board chair believe that it is very important to have a strategy with a goal in mind. Five years ago they developed a strategic plan and linked it to their community health assessment. There were many issues that arose in that assessment, making it important for them to focus and prioritize. As an agency, they decided not to move from one "hot funding topic" to another. Their job is to focus on the issues in their strategic plan, and not pursue funding just because it is available. Kuehnert's final words of advice in this webinar were "in public health there are currently many challenges, but also new opportunities. Think long and hard and have a dialog with your community as you develop your plan for your agency."