

## West-Allis Health Department: Pioneers in Public Health



**AGENCY:** West-Allis (WI) Health Department  
**POPULATION SIZE:** 60,000  
**AGENCY SIZE:** 40 full-time equivalents  
**BUDGET:** \$2.8 million

### Background

Historically, the West-Allis Health Department (WAHD) served an old blue-collar town that was once heavily dominated by the manufacturing industry. In its early years, West-Allis was the home to many manufacturing heavyweights including Allis-Chalmers, a multi-national corporation and the city's namesake. Hit hard by a string of economic recessions in the 70s and 80s, Allis-Chalmers was forced to close its doors, propelling the city of West-Allis into a period of skyrocketing unemployment rates as nearly 10,000 jobs vanished. With a fractured economic backbone, the people of West-Allis were adapting to a new life as they shifted away from their well-paid careers in manufacturing into the service sector, consequently creating an increasing need for public health services.

However, West-Allis has proven to be a city of innovation and perseverance. Through insight, vision, and an excellent redevelopment program, they are witnessing a growth pattern that promises to continue for years to come. This progressive spirit does not fall short of WAHD.

### Pioneers and Pilots

The old adage, "When you've seen one health department, you've seen one health department," has been used to describe local public health for many years. A public health pioneer in his own right, Terry Brandenburg, Health Commissioner of WAHD, is committed to shifting this paradigm by elevating the quality of public health services delivered to his community through the use of performance improvement.

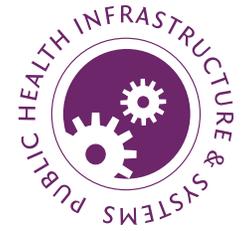
Since WAHD's inception, Brandenburg has been at the table with national leaders shaping what accreditation will look like in public health through his role on the Board of Directors for the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), a strong partner to PHAB. WAHD is no stranger to performance improvement as it served as a pilot test site for

the National Public Health Performance Standards Program (NPHPSP), Project Public Health Ready (PPHR), and the Environmental Public Health Performance Standards Program. As an Accreditation Preparation and Quality Improvement demonstration site for NACCHO, WAHD was involved with using the Operational Definition of a Functional Health Department to assess agency capacity against national standards and identify opportunities for improvement. An eight-person accreditation workgroup and a three year strategic plan for meeting the standards outlined in the NACCHO Self-Assessment Tool was a result of this project, laying the groundwork for WAHD's path to apply for national accreditation in 2011.

### Timing is Key

Since its inception, WAHD used the workplan to systematically collect documentation, calling for 40 percent of the documentation to be collected within the first year, 80 percent by the second year, and 100 percent by the final year. Individual staff were assigned to pull documentation for each section of the standards and then collectively, the accreditation workgroup determined if the documentation was the most appropriate for each measure. Based on experience and expertise, all WAHD staff were informed that they will contribute to documentation development as needed throughout the process. The initial workplan was not based on the PHAB standards. In 2009, when the first draft of the PHAB standards was released, Brandenburg appointed a separate workgroup to revise the workplan to transition from the NACCHO Self Assessment Tool to the new PHAB standards.

With all of this experience under the belt, one of the few titles WAHD does not hold is that of a PHAB beta test site. When asked why WAHD did not apply, Brandenburg lightheartedly responded, "Well, I was trying to avoid a one-way ticket into the Mississippi River." He stated that one key to their success has been timing and pace. When the call for beta test applications was released, WAHD staff was dealing with a number of competing priorities coupled with their own accreditation preparation work, which was well underway. The agency was not in a place to take on the compressed timeframe posed by the beta test. Across the board, WAHD felt that time would be the most challenging hurdle to overcome when pursuing accreditation. Brandenburg takes this very seriously and truly understands the need to balance existing priorities with



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additional responsibilities associated with accreditation. WAHD leadership intentionally developed a three-year plan to address this issue and continuously emphasized to staff that this is not an overnight process and one that would require commitment.

## Why accreditation?

With PHAB still in its infancy, it is only natural for the nation to dissect the benefits and weigh them against the costs. Supporting the idea of accreditation for several years, Brandenburg shared some examples of what he views to be the major benefits of accreditation:

- *A driving force*—Accreditation forces staff to look at every aspect of the organization. As a busy health officer, Brandenburg often found himself pushing things aside with every intention to get to it one day. In reality, all those things will never get done unless there is an impetus to address them. For example, as a result of this process, WAHD developed a comprehensive communications plan that was previously repeatedly pushed aside. Accreditation is about committing to look at the entire organization from one end to another and aligning to standards that are vetted and accepted.
- *Politics*—The police and fire department are both accredited in West-Allis, which is highly valued by the city council and mayor. The political environment looks very favorably to the high standard of efficiency, quality, and effectiveness that accreditation represents. Like the police and fire department, WAHD provides services to protect the health and safety of the West-Allis community making it just as vital for WAHD to become accredited and demonstrate the same level of quality of services to the public.
- *QI and performance management*—Many health departments, including WAHD, are struggling with Domain 9 of the PHAB standards and measures relating to quality improvement (QI), which illustrates that for local public health, QI was previously never on the radar. For WAHD, one of the most exciting things to come out of this accreditation process is the onset of QI and a performance management system. WAHD now has the infrastructure

for a QI culture as an agency QI plan has been established and all professional staff have been trained in QI tools and techniques. Currently, the agency is also in the process of putting together the architecture for a performance management system by establishing goals and metrics to track and measure the performance of all programs and services. “The implementation of QI and a performance management system is a quantum leap in public health practice and if we make that gain alone, this whole effort will be a success,” states Brandenburg.

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—Terry Brandenburg

## Accreditation and Beyond

Once the accreditation workplan is fully implemented, WAHD plans to apply for PHAB accreditation in 2011. Achieving PHAB accreditation will be one step in WAHD’s commitment to improving agency performance and providing a higher standard of services to the West-Allis community. Through the use of QI and development of a performance management system, WAHD will continue to improve the quality of service provided and maintain a consistent standard that the people of West-Allis can always rely on. WAHD leadership and staff are true pioneers in the arena of public health performance improvement and serve as an excellent example for other local health departments interested in accreditation.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact a member of NACCHO’s Accreditation Preparation & Quality Improvement Team at [accredprep@naccho.org](mailto:accredprep@naccho.org).

**NACCHO**

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