

Sullivan County Regional Health Department Meets Performance Excellence Criteria

Sullivan County, Tennessee, is located in northeast Tennessee, about 100 miles north of Knoxville. With just over 150,000 residents, the county contains two metropolitan cities, Bristol (home to Bristol Motor Speedway, a NASCAR track) and Kingsport (home to Eastman Chemical). Bordering Virginia state line, Sullivan County boasts mountains, Appalachian heritage, and a local health department dedicated to improving performance and quality with a goal of receiving the [Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award](#) and national accreditation status.

The state provides public health services for all Tennessee counties except for the six metropolitan areas of Knoxville, Memphis, Chattanooga, Nashville, Jackson and Sullivan County. These jurisdictions have their own local health departments (LHDs) that are operated under their respective local government. Despite this autonomy, these metropolitan LHDs have a strong partnership with the state department of health and work in line with their related policies and procedures.

Health Department Advances Excellence

In 2003, the Sullivan County Regional Health Department (SCRHD) performed a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis to consider current and future challenges and opportunities, and set an appropriate direction accordingly. Accreditation was a subject matter of interest for SCRHD director Gary Mayes, since he and Stephanie Bailey—then director of Metro Health Department of Nashville and Davidson County, and Exploring Accreditation Steering Committee member—had discussed the national effort. Mr. Mayes followed the Exploring Accreditation project closely and began to consider performance improvement. Internally, SCRHD leadership felt that accreditation would be an important achievement in the future, but being a ways off, a more immediate goal was needed for improving performance. Out of this was born an interest in the Malcolm Baldrige National Criteria for Excellence.

Using Baldrige in Public Health

Though the Baldrige Criteria for Excellence were not written with public health practice in mind, the Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence had adapted the Baldrige criteria for local health department use. SCRHD felt that meeting the Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence (TNCPE) first would position the LHD well for meeting Baldrige and accreditation standards in the future.

The TNCPE criteria are a framework that any organization can use to improve overall performance. Seven categories make up the award criteria: leadership; strategic planning; customer/market focus; measurement, analysis, knowledge management; workforce focus; process management; and results. TNCPE Criteria is closely mirrored to Baldrige criteria. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award¹ is given by the President of the United States to businesses—manufacturing and service, small and large—and to education, health care and nonprofit organizations that apply and are judged to be outstanding.

¹ Congress established the award program in 1987 to recognize U.S. organizations for their achievements in quality and performance and to raise awareness about the importance of quality and performance excellence as a competitive edge.

After examining the Baldrige criteria, SCRHD determined that with a few adaptations, they could be applied in a public health setting. Given the prominence of the 10 Essential Public Health Services in national programs related to accreditation, Mayes worked to incorporate them into the TNCPE framework.

Coincidentally, a fictional applicant example that the Baldrige program released was based on a [community health center's experience](#) with meeting the Baldrige standards. SCRHD was able to use this example to help in planning their approach. In addition, Sullivan County's local health council adopted NACCHO's Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) tool as their framework for community public issues. Together, these two tools provided the health department with useful information to drive their performance improvement initiative.

SCRHD Experience

In 2004, after adapting the TNCPE Criteria and working through the criteria for Level One, the Sullivan County Regional Health Department was ready to begin the application process. TCPE is a state-based program nearly identical to Baldrige. The state-based program was developed to help make Tennessee a competitive market for business. Like Baldrige, Level One of TNCPE involves an organizational profile of the agency, examining the mission and vision for the LHD as well as what quality improvement

SCRHD Timeline

2003: SWOT Analysis. Start national accreditation discussions
2005: Receive TNCPE Level One Status
2007: Apply for TNCPE Level Two Status
2011: Apply for national accreditation

processes are in place. The process is like that in the Baldrige national program, whereby examiners visit the agency to perform an onsite survey. Examiners produce a report based on their findings, which can be used to look for areas where quality improvement processes can be implemented. SCRHD reached a Level One status in 2005.

The SCRHD leadership team focused on meeting the criteria and moving the entire process forward, however all 127 LHD staff had a role in strategic planning for the organization and were able to participate to some degree. Before beginning this work, the LHD was operating in what Mr. Mayes referred to as “A responsive mode, reacting to the hot topics of the day and looking for related grant opportunities.” Their goal however, was to become process driven, to determine the needs of the communities served and implement programs based on those needs. SCRHD worked toward achieving Level Two criteria on a less formal basis and decided to apply for Level 3 in 2007. A two-day evaluation ensued, and with six examiners, three of which were program recipients themselves. SCRHD is anxiously awaiting their results.

SCRHD expects to be ready to meet the full Baldrige Criteria by 2011, the same year that voluntary national accreditation will be available. This timeline is fairly typical, even for the private sector. SCRHD Director Gary Mayes explained that while this may seem far off, the reward is in the journey, and seeing the results along the way makes all the difference!

Building a Culture of Quality Improvement

Before moving forward into unfamiliar territory, it was necessary to train staff in what quality improvement (QI) is and on the criteria themselves. Three members of the leadership team came to the health department from the private sector, one from a Level 4 Baldrige organization and one with background in performance excellence. Two staff members participated in a training that Pal's Sudden

Service (a Baldrige Award winning, local, fast-food chain) offered, and have since become Baldrige examiners. These staff members were able to translate their learning experiences to public health practice, and to train other health department staff on QI including Plan-Do-Check-Act; Ishikawa analysis (fishbone diagram); and developing, implementing, and monitoring plans. Employee feedback surveys helped to provide insight into what areas needed improvement, so the SCRHD leadership team could develop action plans.

Lessons Learned

Sullivan County Regional Health Department’s continuing performance excellence journey has been no easy feat. Challenges in this process include changing the culture within the organization. At the outset, the word and concept of ‘Baldrige’ or ‘quality improvement’ had no meaning for many LHD staff.

Through determined and inclusive leadership, employee education and participation in the process led to a more cohesive and significant effort. The criteria were viewed like an onion, with layers that needed to be peeled away to allow each person to fully understand the terminology and meaning of each criteria. A thorough education process to peel away these layers helped the enthusiasm and energy of the staff.

“A supportive environment where results and change can be witnessed helps to sway initially resistant staff.”

-Gary Mayes

SCRHD also consulted with David McClaskey, a renowned Baldrige examiner, as a coach throughout their process. McClaskey’s chief message was not to make performance excellence ‘stapled on work,’ rather to weave it into everyday practice to make the most strides and improvement.

Looking Ahead

Upon reaching Level two status, SCRHD invited the mayor of Sullivan County to attend an awards ceremony where the Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence presented Sullivan County Regional Health Department with the Commitment Award. This type of recognition can serve not only as a morale booster but as a means for elected officials to be made aware of the tremendous work of the local health department in their community.

Gary Mayes notes the following: “Using the criteria, involving employees, along with external partner’s means higher accountability and expectations. Any organization willing to move toward performance excellence must have an agreed upon and understood Mission, Vision, and Values. Organizations need focus and clear sight alignment. Leadership must be fully committed and engaged. It is an exciting journey and fun to see improved results.”