It's Okay to Be a Zero!
Polk County's Experience with Self-Assessment

As someone who has steadily climbed the ranks in the Polk County Health Department since 1977, Gretchen Sampson knows the value and reward of hard work. In her leadership role as Director/Health Officer over the past 13 years, Ms. Sampson has relied on experience and a self-described "can-do attitude" to constantly seek new initiatives to keep the agency on "the cutting edge." As part of her leadership, Ms. Sampson is staying tuned to information and opportunities to prepare for the emerging voluntary national accreditation program from the Public Health Accreditation Board. Upon learning about NACCHO's Operational Definition agency self-assessment tool[1] and gaining experience with quality improvement through the Multi-State Learning Collaborative: Lead States in Public Health Quality Improvement (MLC-3) project, Ms. Sampson did not hesitate to pick up the assessment and combine it with ongoing work at Polk County Health Department. As for a reason, she offered, "I didn't think too much about it. If it's going to help us do a better job, we should do it!"

Process, Pizza, and Public Health

As part of the Wisconsin MLC-3 Project, 15 local health departments (LHDs) in Wisconsin decided to complete the NACCHO self-assessment. In order to prepare for the self-assessment, the Regional Office Directors of the Wisconsin Division of Public Health, worked closely with LHD officials. Over the course of several teleconferences, they discussed the scoring parameters of the NACCHO assessment tool and put them into context for Wisconsin. In order to do this, they used examples from across the state to serve as guidance for what would constitute a 0 to 4 score. The goal was to minimize inconsistencies and provide a frame of reference for each local health department completing the assessment. An example is listed below:

Scoring	Score Description: Essential Service III: Give People the Information They Need to Make Healthy Choices Standard III-A: Develop relationships with media to convey information of public health significance, correct misinformation about public health issues, and serve as an essential resource. Measure #2: LHD has staff competent in working with the media
0	No protocol in place for communicating with the media. No staff trained.
1	At least one staff has attended media training > 4 years ago. No written media communication plan.
2	At least one staff has attended media training in last 4 years. No written media communication plan.
3	Written protocols regarding media communication are in place.
4	Written protocols regarding media communication are in place and at least one staff person has attended media training within the past 2 years.

Once the parameters were settled on for scoring, the LHDs independently began the self-assessment process. In Polk County, Ms. Sampson chose four members of the Health Department's "Leaders Group," which consists of the agency's program coordinators and supervisors, and they went off-site for a day-long meeting. Using highly nutritious foods like pizza, soda, and donuts to maintain energy levels, the group of leaders completed the self-assessment all in one day. Though Ms. Sampson admits that it may not have been the healthiest way, "it was certainly effective!"

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One of the things the Wisconsin MLC-3 LHD participants acknowledged early on was the importance of recognizing weak areas, but maintaining a positive attitude about the possibilities for change. "It was easy for teams to get discouraged when they started receiving low scores of 0 or 1 in certain areas," Ms. Sampson noted. However, during a teleconference with other LHDs using the tool, one of the speakers made a simple statement that had a lasting impact on Polk County: "We completed our scores and decided that it's okay to be a zero. There are some things we don't have the capacity to do, but now it's out in the open and we can focus on it to improve."

This positive attitude resonated with all the participating LHDs in the MLC-3 project and the phrase "It's Okay to be a Zero!" quickly became the new project slogan. At one of the partner statewide meeting, the Project Facilitator, Nancy Young, had the slogan printed on hats and calculators as a way to spread the message and get the group motivated and excited.

Paul Spiegel, Director/Health Officer, Oshkosh Health Department (left) and Larry Gilbertson, Former Director of the Wisconsin Department of Public Health Bureau of Local Health Practice and Emergency Medical Services, sport the specially-made hats.

Results

After completing the self-assessment, the Polk County Leaders Group was pleasantly surprised to see that they had scored highly in several areas. As the Leaders phrased it, "For a rural health department, we're doing a lot of things really well!" This was especially encouraging, given that, "in public health, we are involved in so many things and stretched so thin—it can feel like we're not really good at anything." It was a confidence boost to see high scores in areas including community health assessment and data integration into health assessments.

The results of the self-assessment also impressed the members of Polk County's Board of Health, which encouraged the self-assessment process from the beginning. Ms. Sampson reported that when the Board read the assessment results, "their mouths dropped open in awe." Although the Board was familiar with the work of the health department, "seeing the assessment in writing crystallized for them what exactly goes into running a strong local health department."

QI and Cow Pie: Lessons and Tips

For LHDs considering undertaking a self-assessment process as means to prepare for national accreditation, Ms. Sampson offers the following ideas:

Make it fun! At Polk County, productivity does not have to come at the expense of a good time. Statewide partners in the MLC-3 project feel the same way! During partner MLC-3 meetings, Nancy Young used cow pies, chocolate treats native to Wisconsin, as prizes for various activities. She said that these incentives made meetings "fun

and entertaining" and, by keeping the mood light, the work did not feel overwhelming. In Polk County, Ms. Sampson and the Leader's Group unveiled a new strategic plan that is based on the results of their self-assessment and an agency wide SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis. The plan was revealed in a creative way by incorporating fun activities, such as a scavenger hunt to find objects within the strategic plan. "There may even be more cow pies in our future!"

Involve your governing body. The Polk County Health Department holds monthly meetings with their Board of Health and uses the meetings to keep them abreast of recent initiatives. This frequent communication is important in maintaining the Board's support for the agency and new initiatives like preparing for national accreditation. "If you haven't engaged your board of health in your strategic or community health improvement plan," Ms. Sampson offered, "it will be a much harder sell."

Take notes. Anticipating that they would be weary after a day of looking at 0's and 4's during scoring the self-assessment (despite the sugar rush from doughnuts), the Leaders Group proactively took notes throughout the assessment explaining why they had given themselves a particular score. This way, if there were any disputes or confusion about the scoring later, they could easily be resolved by consulting the notes.

Communicate with staff. Ms. Sampson and the leadership constantly engage the staff through memos, e-mails, and updates during meetings on progress with performance improvement activities throughout the health department. This way the staff have a voice and feel involved in the process. And as many agree "staff engagement is critical" to make any strategic plan a living plan.

Make assessment a priority. While all health departments are busy working at capacity, it is important to take the time and go through an assessment process periodically. As Ms. Sampson learned, "Unless you look at a comprehensive assessment, you can think you're doing the right thing at the right time with the right resources, but until you have a formal process, it's a guessing game."

Just do it. "Just sit down and do it," suggests Ms. Sampson. "You could obsess about the ways and methods of an assessment or plan forever, but you just have to do it to the best of your ability and improve from there."

Challenges

Despite the incentives and snacks along the way, there were also a few obstacles. Ms. Sampson and her team discovered that finding time to complete out the self-assessment and then organizing the information in a meaningful way after the scores were in was a challenge. While completing the self-assessment, they were simultaneously working on a community health improvement process and looking ahead to formulating a new strategic plan for the Health Department. After evaluating their priorities, they eventually decided to hold off on drafting the strategic plan until after performing the self-assessment. That way, they could use the data from the assessment and incorporate it into the new strategic plan. By relating the two processes, they did not have to sacrifice any of their initiatives and were able to create a stronger strategic plan.

Another ongoing challenge for Polk County leadership is clearly communicating to staff about the various initiatives being undertaken at the Department. At the moment Polk County is juggling overall agency improvement, a Chapter 140 review by the state[2], an upcoming community health assessment, and rolling out the newly minted strategic plan based on their self-assessment results. Ms. Sampson acknowledged how all of this could be confusing for staff that is not involved on a daily basis. One of the goals of the leadership is to clarify the differences between these processes moving forward, and ensure engagement.

Plus, LHDs continue to face a time and staffing crunches. Polk County is no exception, and has also seen a reduction in resources over the past 3-5 years. The plan? Ms. Sampson's can-do attitude says it all: "Yes, it will be a challenge to start new work on improvement around our strategic plan; it will require more time. But the staff are really excited about it and they see how this work could lead to accreditation. We have a lot of over-achievers!"

Next Steps

Once the new strategic plan is released in the upcoming weeks, the Department plans to get started on their next community health improvement plan. They will form workgroups for each of the four primary goals of their strategic plan, as outlined in the graphic below:

By using four groups to focus on the four areas, more people will be involved, and the projects will expand beyond the Leaders Group.

In order to successfully carry out their plan, Ms. Sampson recognizes an "immediate need" for training around quality improvement (QI). Not only will the staff need an explanation of the meaning of QI, but also how it can be applied in Polk County to make improvements in the agency.

Finally, now that they have completed the assessment and have a new strategic plan, Polk County can start working towards national accreditation. Ms. Sampson added that completing the self-assessment was helpful because it helped them to "get a better handle on our policy and procedures in written formats," which is an important component of the accreditation process. Polk County will now be able to better organize their paperwork, which will give them an edge when preparing for accreditation.

For Polk County, a can-do attitude prevails: "We all are busy, but it's important that as a provider of public health services, you are assuring the public that what you're providing are high quality and best practices, delivered by a workforce that possesses competencies to deliver those services. In the long run, the goal is to create something that the health department can be proud of and be glad to be a part of." At Polk County, there is a plan for moving from a few zeros to a high quality local health department reflected in fours across the board.

For more information, please contact Gretchen Sampson at **gretchens@co.polk.wi.us.**

[1] NACCHO's *LHD Self-Assessment Tool for Accreditation Preparation* assesses the health department's capacity to meet the Operational Definition of a Functional LHD standards and measures. The national accreditation standards are based on the Operational Definition.

[2] In 1991, Wisconsin's LHDs and the Division of Public Health at the Department of Health Services created an assessment/QI initiative known as *Health Services Administrative Rule 140: Local Health Department Review*. A state statute mandates this process, which aims to ensure that all LHDs provide a basic level of public health services to the community. By utilizing a checklist of required essential services that an LHD either has or does not have, the review examines the structure and function of all 92 LHDs in Wisconsin at least once every five years.

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