



## West Allis, Wisconsin: Local Pioneers

### An Early Adopter

Wisconsin joined the Multi-State Learning Collaborative (MLC) in the project's third phase to work with 15 other states to lead a national initiative advancing accreditation efforts and quality improvement (QI) strategies in public health departments. Terry Brandenburg, the Health Commissioner at the West Allis Health Department, has been a public health leader in Wisconsin for 18 years. Energetic and passionate about advancing public health practice, Terry describes his investment in accreditation by saying that he “generally know[s] enough to be dangerous.” As Health Commissioner, Terry has been involved with national public health organizations for a number of years, and in 2004 he represented the National Public Health Leadership Society (NPHLS) at a summit sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Institute of Medicine. Terry came away from this summit believing that he had seen the future of public health: a public health accreditation program that would encourage quality improvement, provide health departments with feedback about their strengths and weaknesses, and ultimately improve health outcomes in communities. After seeing at the summit the direction that public health practice was taking, Terry knew he had to bring accreditation preparation to the West Allis Health Department.

### Striking a Balance

A local health department like West Allis plays many roles and provides a wide range of services to the community, and often there are competing demands for staff time and resources. Fortunately, Terry was not the only West Allis Health Department member willing to take risks and dive in early. “We have an organization right now where we will jump into things; it is part of the organizational culture,” he says about the department. “In a lot of cases we will be early adopters. And we have the folks who will follow through and make it happen.”

Channeling this pioneering spirit, Terry formed a core accreditation preparation workgroup. Comprised of eight people in the department, the workgroup has been meeting for three years and was a key factor in overcoming internal concerns about how to balance accreditation preparation with other critical public health priorities. By using the workgroup as a planning committee and sounding board, Terry has remained sensitive to other pressing priorities, such as the 2009 H1N1 flu epidemic. By assessing what else is on the health department's agenda, Terry underscores to his staff that he understands the demands on their time and is committed to pursuing accreditation in a balanced and strategic way.

### Getting Started

Once his staff was on board, Terry began searching for ways that the West Allis Health Department could get involved in accreditation preparation. Terry was sold on the benefits of accreditation but wasn't sure where to go next. After learning about the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) National Public Health Performance Standards Program, a natural opportunity emerged. The CDC put out a call for health departments nationwide to volunteer to test a tool designed to assess their public health systems. The West Allis Health Department was one of ten sites selected—an opportunity Terry and his staff viewed as a crucial learning experience. Through the project, the department convened a retreat of community stakeholders and got feedback about the system's strength and capacity to improve the public's health. “We got a sense of how to align with a set of standards,” says Terry.

The next breakthrough came when the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) asked health departments to apply for demonstration projects that included formulating a plan for accreditation preparation. The NACCHO demonstration project was a chance to turn the focus from the broader public health system to the health department specifically. The West Allis Health Department was accepted as a NACCHO demonstration site.

“That was really where we started to get our hands around accreditation,” explains Terry of the value behind the project. “We used the assessment tool and we made the commitment to assess our agency and develop a work plan for accreditation.”

From testing the waters of how to align with standards to developing a full-fledged accreditation work plan, West Allis was getting its feet wet in accreditation and leading as an early adopter.

## Bringing the Community on Board

Using the CDC and NACCHO pilot projects as rallying points, Terry began the task of getting community partners on board, beginning with the Board of Health. West Allis' Board of Health has nine members, including two city aldermen. Terry stayed true to the idea that all politics are local and drew upon two community developments to make his case. Two local agencies had successfully pursued accreditation – the fire department was nationally accredited and the police department was regionally accredited. “The Town Council felt that it was a big deal and it was looked on very favorably,” said Terry. “We saw support in the community for accreditation, and the political climate with those two examples meant that there wasn't any resistance.” By linking public health accreditation to the accreditation of other vital services, like law enforcement, Terry helped the Town Council to see it as a positive step for West Allis. Now Terry had support from his health department staff, the Board of Health, and the Town Council. It was time to begin implementing the accreditation work plan.

## Preparation in Action

With key supporters in place, Terry turned the department's attention to national developments. In 2009, the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), the manager and promoter of the national accreditation program, released the first draft of the national public health accreditation standards. Terry created a new three-person workgroup to address the transition from the NACCHO assessment tool to the PHAB standards. “We revised our planning tool based on the PHAB plan. We laid out our strengths and weakness and saw where we have to go,” says Terry of the process. “It wasn't a hard transition...and now our plan and assessment is based on the PHAB standards.” The transition was smooth, and the preparation by Terry, the workgroup, and department staff meant that West Allis had firm benchmarks built into the plan. Terry and his team were on track to meet the goals they had presented their goals to the Board of Health in 2008. Furthermore, they were on track to apply for national public health accreditation when the program launches in 2011.

## “Charged up for 2011”

After he attended the summit in 2004, Terry knew that the future of public health practice would be rooted in a national accreditation program. Since then, he has pioneered the West Allis Health Department through a multi-step process to build internal support at the department, bring community leaders to the table, and develop and implement a comprehensive accreditation plan that will keep West Allis on track to apply in 2011. In the end, Terry makes the best case for early and enthusiastic accreditation preparation. “I have been a health officer for 25 years. I've seen the peaks and the valleys. You can't have a broad brush, sometimes you have to make tough calls and balance many variables... I think we're charged up about being ready for 2011.”