



Oklahoma: Support Straight from the Top

New Leadership Brings Opportunity

Oklahoma joined the Multi-State Learning Collaborative (MLC) in the project's third phase to work with 15 other states in this national initiative advancing accreditation efforts and quality improvement (QI) strategies in public health departments. Spring 2009 was a busy time in the world of public health accreditation, as the national accrediting body, the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), prepared to release the draft accreditation standards and measures for review. Health departments across the country, including the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH), were eager to see how their accreditation preparation efforts would line up with the PHAB standards. At the OSDH, however, the exciting national developments were tempered with a bit of state anxiety. That spring, the Oklahoma State Board of Health would be appointing a new Health Commissioner, Dr. Terry Cline. As a public health leader with prior experience as the Health Attaché for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq and as the Administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in Washington D.C., Dr. Cline had the potential to be a powerful ally for public health accreditation in Oklahoma. Because of the high likelihood of internal and external partners adopting Dr. Cline's position, it was critical for senior leadership and the Office of Performance Management to secure his support for the national accreditation movement.

Shortly after Dr. Cline's appointment in early July 2009, Joyce Marshall, Director of the Office of Performance Management, scheduled a meeting with Dr. Cline and key team members, including two deputy commissioners from the department. They were fully prepared to speak to Dr. Cline about the perceived benefits, along with any perceived barriers, in pursuing accreditation. The team's goal was for the state health department and several county health departments to apply that summer for PHAB's public health accreditation beta test, an 18-month process through which health departments nationwide test the standards and measures and provide feedback on the accreditation process – an effort that would inform the development of the national standards. However, the state budget forecast was a major concern, and the team worried that limited resources would prevent the department from taking advantage of this unique opportunity to prepare for accreditation. They knew that having the Commissioner engaged would move them much closer to their goal. "It's important to set the meeting as early as possible...especially if you can address it from their side, looking at the full picture, both benefits and barriers, and from all sides possible such as legislature, public, partners... if you address those up front and can clearly show the positive benefits outweigh the barriers, they can immediately see the impact it can have," said Joyce.

Making the Pitch

The time finally came for Joyce and the team members to meet with Dr. Cline. With the beta test application deadline and other competing priorities looming, the team hoped for the best. "We had been preparing...we knew it was a hard budget time," said Joyce. "But we went to him and told him where we were as a state and what we were doing [to prepare for accreditation]." Fortunately, the team's hard work and preparation paid off, and the meeting was an unqualified success. Dr. Cline appreciated the connection between accreditation and quality improvement in the health department and assured the team that, even with resource limitations, it was going to be a priority. "He said, 'Yes I know we have limited resources, but this is important and we're going to put the extra effort toward it...This is a unique opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of our services and also showcase the high quality programs and services associated with the Oklahoma State Department of Health. Our agency and state will do what it takes,'" said Joyce.

Immediate Impact

The effects of the meeting with Dr. Cline became immediate and readily apparent. Joyce, working with Dr. Cline, designated a team that would lead the work on accreditation preparation and the beta test. Dr. Cline agreed to sign onto a letter notifying the team of his decision to fully support and pursue accreditation. As Joyce says:

“That really assisted in the effort, having the full support of our Commissioner behind accreditation and the beta test. There wasn’t any guessing, it was basically put out there that it was a priority and that this was the direction leadership wanted the Oklahoma State Department of Health to go.”

Dr. Cline’s support letter was just the start of a sustained collaboration between the Health Commissioner’s office and the core accreditation team. From letters, to meetings with the Board of Health, to the Commissioner assuming the position as the Chair of the Oklahoma Health Improvement Planning Team, leadership consensus and enthusiasm resonated loud and clear.

Beta Test Leaders

With Dr. Cline engaged as an active spokesperson for accreditation and the beta test, Oklahoma applied for the beta test at the state and local levels. The team was encouraged to see Dr. Cline take an active role in the application process, which involved a series of meetings to determine which local health departments should apply, as well as completing the state’s application. The OSDH also worked with tribal leaders to discuss how the state health department and the tribal nations could support each other in accreditation preparation. Ultimately, Dr. Cline’s commitment to accreditation contributed to a positive outcome: Oklahoma is the only state to have a health department participating in the beta test at all three levels.

While working on the beta test application, the team also sought ways to increase support for accreditation within the state health department, a challenge faced by many health departments. As Joyce discovered, Dr. Cline’s support was instrumental in this effort:

“Overall, our employees have been really great throughout the process and we could not have asked for a more committed, hard-working team...however, this effort was greatly assisted by Dr. Cline and our State Board of Health saying in more than one circumstance that accreditation was a top priority and something they felt was very important. I think that overcame a lot of concerns or resistance that may have been felt by some at the beginning. There could be people who were anxious about the budget but this support ... took away those issues and concerns. They knew where our Commissioner and Board stood and this made it easier for them to say that they had to make it a priority.”

The positive impact of Dr. Cline’s steadfast support not only enabled the OSDH to apply successfully for the beta test and continue preparing for accreditation, but it also helped other staff at the health department see accreditation as a priority in their work. Joyce’s experience provides a lesson for other health departments struggling with building internal support that sometimes all it takes is one person in a leadership position who will lead by example.

“It Meant Everything”

Back in the summer of 2009, there was uncertainty as to what was going to happen when Dr. Cline became Oklahoma’s Health Commissioner. Now, half way through the beta test, Joyce reflects on how important it is to secure buy-in from the top:

“He gave that 100 percent support from the beginning. It was without hesitation... that would be the most thanks we’d want to give him. We wouldn’t have been able to move forward and make the strides that we made without that unwavering, total support that was made clear to everyone. It makes an amazing difference when you have that full leadership support. It meant everything.”