



PUBLIC WORKS ACCREDITATION



A brief description of a public works accreditation concept and what it offers to the public works community.

INTRODUCTION TO ACCREDITATION

The American Public Works Association (APWA) has developed a program to enhance the effectiveness of agencies and their competencies in the public works field. This voluntary, multifaceted program is designed to provide guidance and technical resources to agency managers as they seek to evaluate and upgrade the performance of their agencies. This program has as its foundation the ***Public Works Management Practices Manual*** (often referred to as "The Manual.")

Public Works Management Practices is a manual of more than 500 procedures necessary to perform as a public works agency. The manual provides the framework for an objective evaluation of an agency. Many public works agencies in the United States and Canada have used the manual to conduct self assessments of their operations. These assessments have lead to improvements in how these agencies conduct their work.

Self assessment is an agency-wide review of management and operations policies and practices as compared to nationally recognized "recommended" practices developed by members of APWA. It is an internal, voluntary effort with a focus on improvement opportunities. There are many benefits to conducting a self assessment and they vary from agency to agency. Some of the benefits that can be realized by an agency are: providing a framework for strategic planning, gaining insight into how services are provided, creating the catalyst for change, orienting employees, training supervisors, and becoming a better managed agency.

APWA has developed a toolbox of workshops, publications and software which provide guidance on using the manual to conduct a self assessment. APWA is committed to developing additional tools to assist agencies in performing a self assessment, making continuous improvement and attaining accreditation.

Public works accreditation is the recognition that the agency subscribes to the concept of continuous improvement and has conducted an in-depth self assessment of the agencies policies, procedures and practices. It is the verification and recognition of an agency for conformance with a recognized body of management practices.

WHAT IS PUBLIC WORKS ACCREDITATION?

A: The purpose of the accreditation program is to provide a means of formally verifying and recognizing public works agencies for compliance with the recommended practices set forth in the *Public Works Management Practices Manual*. It is a voluntary, self-motivated approach to objectively evaluate, verify and recognize compliance with the recommended management practices. The objectives of the accreditation program are to:

- Create impetus for organizational self improvement and stimulate a general raising of standards;
- Offer a voluntary evaluation and educational program rather than government regulated activity;
- Recognize good performance and provide motivation to maintain and improve performance;
- Improve public works performance and the provision of services;
- Increase professionalism;
- Instill pride among agency staff, elected officials and the local community.

WHAT ARE THE GUIDELINES USED TO ACCREDIT AN AGENCY?

A: The *Public Works Management Practices Manual* is the basis for the accreditation program. It contains the practices identified by public works practitioners as being important in providing services. The practices are not standards since they do not dictate how a function or activity should be accomplished. They provide a systematic method to evaluate every function in the organization. Each agency is responsible for establishing policies, procedures and practices. The criteria established by each agency must withstand the scrutiny of the evaluation team and the Accreditation Council.

IS ACCREDITATION REQUIRED OF PUBLIC WORKS AGENCIES?

A: The accreditation program is strictly voluntary. There are no mandates or requirements that public works agencies seek accreditation. As a voluntary program, an agency sets its own timeline for submitting an application and completing the accreditation process. It is important that this program be maintained as a voluntary effort.

MUST AN AGENCY MEET ALL PRACTICES IN THE MANUAL TO BE ACCREDITED?

A: Agencies that seek accreditation are required to comply only with practices specifically applicable to them. This is determined by the type of agency and the functions it performs. Each agency must document how they comply with all applicable practices. An agency must demonstrate compliance with the recommended practices which are applicable. The accreditation program is flexible to meet the responsibilities and characteristics of each agency.

WHAT IF AN AGENCY IS PROHIBITED FROM COMPLYING WITH A PRACTICE?

A: If an agency cannot comply with a practice because it is prohibited by legislation, labor agreement, court orders or case law, waivers can be sought to set aside that practice statement for the agency.

WHAT AGENCIES ARE ELIGIBLE FOR ACCREDITATION?

A: All governmental agencies with responsibilities for public works functions are eligible for accreditation. Accreditation is awarded to the department that provides the public works service. Eligibility for public works accreditation is verified by the Accreditation Council. There is no quota, or annual limit on the number of agencies that can apply for accreditation.

WHO IS THE ACCREDITING BODY?

A: The accreditation program has been established within APWA with representation from other national organizations and groups that affect the public works field or are notable for their contributions to the field. An operating policy has been established which outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Accreditation Council.

HOW LONG DOES THE ACCREDITATION LAST BEFORE IT MUST BE REPEATED?

A: Initial accreditation is for a four-year period. A semi-annual updates will be required to demonstrate continuing compliance. A re-accreditation process has been developed which builds on the original accreditation to encourage continuous improvement and compliance with newly identified practices.

IS THERE AN APPEAL PROCESS?

A: An appeals process is provided for an agency to review process issues raised during the accreditation process.

WHAT IS THE SELF ASSESSMENT PROCESS?

A: Accreditation is a major step in a program of continuous improvement of public works services. Before applying for accreditation, an agency must conduct an internal evaluation of its policies, procedures and practices to determine its strengths and areas for improvement. This self assessment is documented and forms the basis for making continuous improvements in agency operations. The accreditation component involves an objective review by experienced public works professional. The self assessment process prepares an agency for this review and leads to the preparation of necessary documentation.

IS ACCREDITATION AN INTENSIVE PROCESS?

A: Accreditation does require an agency to document its policies, procedures and practices. The amount of effort required to do this will depend on what the agency already has in place and how committed they are to the process. The program requires that existing policies, procedures and practices are well documented and communicated to those that should know about them. The self assessment process provides the systematic framework to gauge how well an agency has documented its policies, procedures and practices, and how effective it is at getting the job done. An agency must provide proof that it does comply with each practice that is applicable.

HOW IS PROOF OF COMPLIANCE WITH THE PRACTICES ACCOMPLISHED?

A: Compliance with the recommended practices is determined through an on-site evaluation. The site evaluation team is composed of public works practitioners. They are selected to serve on the site evaluation team because of their knowledge in the public works field. Proof of compliance will be demonstrated by review of written records, policies, practices and procedures; interviews with staff, managers, elected officials and community leaders; supplemented by field observations.

WHO CONDUCTS THE ON-SITE ASSESSMENT?

A: Experienced public works professional are recruited and trained to serve as evaluators. Wherever possible, these volunteers will be assigned to evaluate agencies of similar size and type as the agencies they serve. This interaction with peers is a key part of the accreditation program as it provides a valuable source of information, networking and support. Agencies are encouraged to make the process an educational experience. Evaluators will not be assigned to conduct assessments where they may have a potential conflict of interest.

CAN AN AGENCY REVIEW THE NAMES AND QUALIFICATIONS OF EVALUATORS IN ADVANCE?

A: The agency will be notified of the identities and backgrounds of potential evaluators in advance and can indicate any potential conflicts of interest or other concerns, and may request the assignment of an alternate evaluator.

ONCE AGAIN, WHAT ARE THE MAJOR STEPS IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS?

A: Once an agency submits a formal application for accreditation, the APWA staff and Accreditation Council determines whether the agency meets eligibility criteria. The agency conducts a self assessment to determine the extent to which it meets applicable practices and assembles the necessary documentation of compliance with the recommended practices. It is important to remember that the practices are not standards, and do not dictate how to accomplish a task or set standards for performance. The practices identify the need to address an issue or requirement of operating a public works agency. The agency creates its own policies, procedures and practices which are appropriate for its community. The time period for completion of the self assessment is flexible.

Next the agency makes improvements necessary to comply with all applicable practices. The results of the final self assessment are submitted to APWA for review.

Upon reviewing the self assessment report and finding it meets the criteria established by the Accreditation Council, the staff will schedule a team of evaluators to conduct a site visit to the agency for the purpose of verifying its compliance with the recommended practices. This involves examining the documentation for proof of compliance that the agency prepared during the self assessment process. The evaluation team report is forwarded to the Accreditation Council which either awards or denies accreditation. If accreditation is denied or deferred, the agency is provided with an outline of the steps required to gain full compliance with the practices.

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO PREPARE FOR ACCREDITATION?

A: APWA has developed, through its membership, the manual of practices that is the basis for the accreditation program. The manual is updated as practices evolve and technologies change. A self assessment process has been developed to guide agencies in organizing their internal assessment. Workshops are available through APWA for training staff members who will be conducting self assessments. APWA provides assistance to an agency seeking to conduct a Peer Review of specific practices for the purpose of improving them. A group of agencies involved in self assessment may also be organized to exchange information on the self assessment programs. APWA chapters are another resource for agencies and individuals that can help prepare for accreditation by providing a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas. Additional guidance materials will be developed to assist agencies in preparing for accreditation as the needs are identified. A specific infoNOW community is available for agencies who have signed contracts which allows questions and responses to be directed towards others who have already completed the program.

ARE THERE DISADVANTAGES TO ACCREDITATION?

A: There are obvious risks and other implications associated with pursuing accreditation. It does require a significant amount of effort to conduct a self assessment and make necessary improvements in the operations and management of your agency. There are also costs involved for the accreditation process, though efforts will be made to keep these reasonable and affordable to all agencies regardless of size. It is expected accreditation will bring sufficient improvement to the operations and management of agencies to offset most, if not all of the potential disadvantages. Potential benefits as more agencies become accredited may parallel those experienced by the law enforcement community.

WHAT DOES ACCREDITATION COST?

A: The program is very sensitive to the need to keep costs at an affordable level. The fee schedule has been established which is based on the agency's population and number of functional areas provided by the agency and included for review. Accreditation fees are designed to recover the actual costs associated with administering the program such as staff salaries, postage, and printing and production of materials. An estimate of total accreditation costs based on the characteristics of each agency will be provided to applicants at the time of application. The costs of the on-site evaluation represent the unknown cost, since the agencies will be responsible for actual costs. Accreditation fees for a medium size municipal agency are expected to be between \$10,000 and \$15,000, over the two- to three-year process, not including the agency's staff expenses.

WHAT IF AN AGENCY FAILS TO ACHIEVE ACCREDITATION?

A: Agencies are encouraged to conduct a thorough self assessment prior to applying for accreditation. The self assessment provides benefits in evaluating your agency and identifying areas that need to be improved before accreditation could be conferred. Self assessment provides the information necessary to help agencies that may want to pursue accreditation. Once steps are taken to address the shortcomings identified by the self assessment process, the agency could apply for accreditation. The Accreditation Council and APWA staff will use the initial application to gauge whether an agency has adequately prepared for accreditation. Serious deficiencies may be noted before the site visit is scheduled and the application can be held until corrections are made. If an agency completes its accreditation site assessment and is found to have a few deficiencies in meeting the practices, the council may award partial accreditation and set conditions that would provide for accreditation if minor corrections are made within certain time frames.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN RE-ACCREDITATION?

A: Re-accreditation begins with the preparing of semi-annual updates by the agency to verify it is continuing to comply with the spirit and intent of accreditation. This is an important step as it provides a target for each agency to use to ensure continuous improvements of its operations. The reporting process provides a framework for noting how the agency has advanced over the accreditation period. Accreditation is part of a continuous improvement process, not a destination.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS?

A: Accreditation provides a systematic approach to perform an objective assessment by an independent entity. Accreditation also provides a visible indication that the agency complies with the recommended practices established by the American Public Works Association, as published in the *Public Works Management Practices Manual*.

The benefits of conducting a self assessment and achieving accreditation include:

- Formal recognition of well run agencies
- A mechanism to evaluate the organization
- A target for improving operations
- Public recognition of public works function
- Justifying budget requests
- Instilling pride in personnel
- Reducing liability
- Lowering insurance premiums
- Raising national public works profiles
- Benefiting in personnel recruitment
- Encouraging documentation of policies
- Encouraging improvement of procedures
- Raising competencies in public works
- Consistent, comprehensive practices
- Fostering interaction among personnel
- Encouraging employee involvement.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

A: From the Technical Services Department

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Public Works Management Practices Manual



Developed by, and for, public works professionals, this widely-used Public Works Management Practices Manual represents the state of the practice and the standard of public works performance. The Manual updates

and improves statements on more than 500 practices which describe the basic criteria and procedures necessary to perform as a full service public works agency and provides the framework for the objective self-evaluation of an agency. Organized into multiple chapters relating to specific areas, the manual deals with such topics as organization, personnel management, planning, finance, risk management, communications, record keeping, construction, buildings, equipment, solid waste, storm water, and traffic engineering, cemeteries, airports, and many others.

Accreditation Process Guide

A step-by-step guide to assist in working through the process, from Self-Assessment through Accreditation, is now available online at: www.apwa.net/Documents/Accreditation/Acc_Process_Guide.pdf



Self-Assessment Tracking Software

Software designed to assist agencies in managing the self assessment process and keeping track of supporting documentation.

These resources can be purchased through the APWA Bookstore at 816-472-6100, or on our website: www.apwa.net/bookstore/



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