

# **Strategic Communications Plan for the Maricopa County Department of Public Health**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Maricopa County Department of Public Health (the Department) serves a population in the Southwestern United States of almost 4 million people. It is the third largest local health department of its kind in terms of population base, and it works to protect and promote the health and well-being of Maricopa County residents and visitors.

The Department's responsibilities range from protecting the public from food-borne illnesses, natural and man-made disasters, toxic exposures and communicable disease, to prevention based measures against heart disease, cancer and diabetes by addressing risk factors such as poor nutrition, inadequate physical activity and tobacco use, to name a few. Clinical services and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program serve patients and customers directly with medical and nutritional needs.

Department management and leadership are moving the agency in the direction of being a trusted resource for public health policy and information for residents and visitors of Maricopa County. This action will better position the agency to be the go-to clearing-house of health information for Maricopa County and more easily serve as a public health partner to a variety of entities including hospitals, higher educational partners, government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Additionally, the Department is seeking accreditation through the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and that agency's certifying body – the Public Health Accreditation Board. The achievement of this national accreditation ("Accreditation") is designed to continuously improve the quality of practice and performance in all public health departments across the country. The process is driven by national standards based on 10 Essential Services of Public Health and requires candidate agencies to undergo a community health assessment followed by the creation of a community health improvement plan, and ultimately a strategic plan.

Accreditation will allow the Department to identify strengths and weaknesses for improvement in its overall function and quality; provide validation and recognition to county administration; and assure Department staff and other stakeholders that it is meeting national standards for quality and service. Although not an ideal situation, it is an achievement of the Department and commitment of staff to accomplish what they have with resources far below that of comparable, metro-based agencies across the United States. Accreditation may potentially increase the agency's federal funding opportunities by adding a competitive certification standard and mark of performance quality to the Departments grant applications.

## **STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES**

Accreditation preparation requires the Department to prepare extensive documentation and undergo a community health assessment (CHA) and community health improvement plan (CHIP) with various community stakeholders. This effort has provided a natural starting point for identifying audiences to engage with, and for message creation and delivery. Both the Department's vision, mission and accreditation criteria mirror efforts within the agency to achieve a level of quality and excellence and are presented in this plan as comparable and ongoing. This plan presents both Accreditation and general communication strategy as combined efforts to create sustainable activities and practical tools for Department use, and takes into account existing strategy, activities and tools.

### **Objectives**

- Assists the Department in better communicating with its internal and external audiences
- A strategic communications plan that assists the Department in attaining national accreditation from the Public Health Accreditation Board

### **Communication Principles**

- All change of opinion begins with expanding education and awareness
- The best communication is two-way, involving dialogue and a change in attitude or reinforcement of beliefs; this is enhanced by audience involvement
- Opinion is often based in self-interest
- Persuasion may (1) change or neutralize hostile opinions, (2) crystallize latent opinions and positive attitudes, and (3) reinforce favorable opinions
- The goal of the Department's messaging is to first effect a change in attitude, then behavior of its audiences
- A message is more believable if its source is credible; the Department must deliver its messages honestly, clearly and from a position of expertise
- Messages are most persuasive when they are simple, consistent, aligned with the audiences' needs, concerns and interests, and repeated over time
- The prevalence of social media and online communication tools has significantly changed the manner and outreach potential for agencies but clarity, conciseness and consistency of messaging remains a priority.

### **Key Audiences**

The strategies and tactics set forth in this plan are directed at forming what key audiences believe about the Department and affecting what they do in response to those beliefs. Although noble, it cannot be simply said that the Department's goals are good and its audiences should support these. Rather, an understanding of the Department's audiences, both internal and external is necessary to identify their self-interest or engagement drivers, increase their awareness, involve them, seek their feedback and invest in channels to repetitively communicate a consistent set of messages.

The Department's audiences fit generally under internal and external categories:

- Internal staff located primarily in the Department's 4041 N. Central offices as well as Clinical Services based at 1645 E. Roosevelt Street and WIC satellite offices located throughout the county
- County administration including the county manager and support services for the Department
- Community partners
- Patients and customers (Clinical Services, WIC)
- General public

*(\*see Appendix A: Key Audiences, Engagement, Recommendations)*

### **Messaging**

At its most simple form, communication requires determining who your audience is and what you want to tell them. Once audiences are established the communication content or "what" takes the form of message creation. For a public agency with a vision and mission of creating a healthy and safe community and protecting and promoting the health and well-being of Maricopa residents and visitors, the Department must present itself to its audiences as credible and deliver its messages honestly, clearly and from a position of expertise. These messages should be simple, consistent and aligned with the audiences' needs, concerns and interests.

As a result of collaborative meetings with Communications and Accreditation staff and a cross section of senior management, as well as a review and an increased understanding of key audience expectations; the following set of messages consistent with the Department's mission, vision and Accreditation are presented:

- We are developing a sustainable, healthy community
- We are one in the same with our community partners; protecting and serving the public with quality healthcare and education
- We are creating a public health department that serves as a resource and a partner for our hospitals and healthcare providers because we must have a sustainable public health network county-wide
- Accreditation is growth with purpose that will increase the entire Department's standing and reputation
- Accreditation gives all employees the opportunity to begin on the "first floor" of the Department's efforts to achieve a national standard for service and performance – an opportunity for professional renewal
- Accreditation will not result in the sacrifice or loss of programs
- Our policy and healthcare decisions are made with the customer in mind
- We are a Department that can be trusted with public funds

### **Recommendations for Advancing Accreditation and Department Communication**

- The process of attaining, and achievement of Accreditation presents an opportunity to engage employees in new ways of thinking, to start "fresh" or from the ground up, all employees have

the opportunity to begin on the “first floor” of the Department’s efforts to achieve a national standard for service and performance and to re-shape the place they work for

- A majority of Department staff are very committed to the ideals and practical outcomes of public health (e.g., service delivery, issue awareness, policy information dissemination); its positive impact on the community at large and its necessity for a productive and healthy workforce. This commitment should be capitalized on to promote the benefits of Accreditation and general, positive changes within the Department
- Activities and planning that promote employees becoming “communication pathways” about Cloud purposes, the importance of the Dashboard as an essential performance measuring tool, the new online newsletter and other systems should be directed so that “everyone is an ambassador” for Accreditation and the Department
- Capitalize on the exceptional degree of confidence that staff and management have in the Department Director. For public agencies there is an unusually high support of, and appreciation for this individual. This respect and belief that the Director is the right person to lead the Department to becoming an outstanding agency should be leveraged for maximum benefit
- Current human resource efforts to re-introduce the Director’s participation in “Public Health 101” for new employees should be encouraged and sustained. The Director’s vision for the Department; his understanding of current public health policy trends; his ability to explain the importance of Accreditation; and stories about the Director’s own career experiences in public health should be shared with employees
- Initiate “Brown Bag with the Boss” or “Brown Bag with the Director”: small audience meetings with employees in different areas to update them on current Department priorities such as Accreditation and to reinforce the Director’s commitment and interest in his or her employees. These should be conducted on a rotating basis at least every three (3) months; more frequently as the Accreditation site team visit approaches
- The concept of management addressing different Department areas on a rotating basis should be adapted to community partners such as the Health Improvement Partnership of Maricopa County (HIPMC). For example, the CEO of a hospital or education stakeholder group could be briefed on Accreditation and Department updates by a small team of management including the Director. This is similar to a concept used by the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors to “bring Maricopa County to you”: a Supervisor visits their district and brings select department heads to address and update the public and provide constituent service
- Department management has done a very good job of updating county management and has gained support for Accreditation. This support must never be taken for granted and regular updates of supervising management including the county manager should continue, particularly as the Accreditation site team visit approaches

- In consultation with the county manager select briefings with county supervisors should take place regarding positive changes in the Department and Accreditation progress since site team members may ask county supervisors about the Department's Accreditation efforts and expect governing board support
- The Department has accomplished excellent results and relationship-building through the HIPMC as well as brand identification of the partnership with various community stakeholders. Resulting from the requirements of Accreditation this partnership also provides a natural way for the Department to continue re-accreditation sometime in 2020 and to sustain as well as expand its external supporters over time
- Potential stakeholders such as Accountable Care Organizations (ACO) or Patient Centered Medical partners should continue to be contacted and relationships established; the Department has begun work in this area
- Outreach to think-tanks and public policy entities like Arizona State University's Morrison Institute or the Center for the Future of Arizona should be done to establish an ongoing relationship and potential partnership. In addition to the prospect of raising the Department's reputation as an authority on public health policy, an ongoing partnership would insure that the Department is one of the first calls made when these organizations are making a new report or announcement. This type of high profile partnership may also be a bridge for involvement of county supervisors in developing outside relationships and engagement with the Department.

*(\*see Appendix B: General Communications & Accreditation Action Plan & Messaging Recommendations)*

## **IDENTITY, COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

A number of factors are driving change within the Department, including:

- Changes in the American economy and the allied healthcare industry affecting medical care delivery and public health policy
- The Affordable Care Act and its impact on the healthcare industry
- A post-recession, volatile Arizona economy and the challenges experienced by operating a public health agency in a politically and fiscally conservative environment
- Minimal state and local funding for public health initiatives
- Misperceptions regarding the purpose and place of public health in society
- Internal initiatives to move the Department towards becoming a source of information and clearinghouse for public health policy
- Requirements for public health accreditation.

The Department is an organization in transition embracing what it has committed to doing in the past while taking on a number of new initiatives. The following observations and recommendations are meant

to assist the Department from a communications perspective as it addresses the above challenges to its vision, services and key audiences engagement:

- A perception exists that the movement of the Department towards a greater public health policy mission may leave patient and customer-based service areas marginalized, sacrificed or re-assigned. This perception or misperception is then strengthened by the amount of change occurring in the Department by activities such as Accreditation preparation. Department leadership and communications personnel should take every opportunity to assure staff that Accreditation does not equal sacrifice or loss of programs; rather, it is change for a purpose that will increase the entire Department's standing and reputation
- As the Department looks to concepts such as "return on investment" (ROI) for program justification to fiscally conservative audiences, its leadership must keep in mind that greater education about Department initiatives and purpose for these audiences may be necessary before concepts like ROI can be interpreted as an appropriate way for a government agency to behave. Some audiences believe that government should simply be minimized over time after basic and necessary services are delivered, and that government should not be sustained or expanded
- The Department's outreach to private hospital systems (health needs assessments; ACO assistance, etc.) may be perceived by some conservative observers as unnecessary public agency interference in the free market (i.e., perception: "why is the health department picking winners and losers in the free market; let these private hospitals do their own assessments"). This type of outreach and assistance should be carefully conducted and the Department should consider garnering support or at least a neutral understanding for its initiatives through organizations representing conservative views or established national or local think tanks
- Greater accomplishments and public attention always invite greater scrutiny and criticism. The Department must carefully introduce new programs that may generate political and public attention thereby reducing misinterpretation and unintended consequences such as a reduction of funding by the board of supervisors (i.e., perception: "Accreditation will give them the funding they will need, let's re-prioritize budget lines to other Departments")

## Appendix A: Key Audiences, Engagement, Recommendations

<i>Key Audiences</i>	<i>What is important to them?</i>	<i>How do we engage them?</i>
Department staff (all employees)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ An organized Department that protects and promotes the health of the public</li> <li>▪ Good, fair management that knows how to lead the Department</li> <li>▪ An understanding of how their job fits into the larger purpose of the Department</li> <li>▪ Secure, safe working environment</li> </ul>	<p>The Department is already addressing issues of changing its organizational structure as a result of Accreditation application and management direction. The formation of Cloud groups has significantly improved employee understanding of their role in the agency.</p> <p>Greater efforts should be made Department-wide to educate all employees about Accreditation purpose and necessity.</p>
Clinical services and WIC offices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Delivery of patient and customer service in a timely manner</li> <li>▪ Department-wide understanding that their responsibilities are driven by patient/customer demand</li> <li>▪ There is respect and support for Accreditation necessity, but their time for preparation and education is limited</li> </ul>	<p>Both geographic location and daily responsibilities that differ significantly from other Department staff are immediate barriers to communication. Activities and behaviors from management and communication staff should clearly recognize the uniqueness of these areas. Planning Accreditation or other education/awareness programs should be customized to this unique audience and to be delivered on-site and on a rotating basis to fit the schedules of these areas.</p>
County Management  (Board of Supervisors, county manager, county senior management supporting Department)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supports Accreditation because it will give the Department a high local and national standing</li> <li>▪ To serve as a balancing entity and checkpoint between the public and county departments</li> <li>▪ Department is fulfilling its mission in a cost-conscious manner</li> <li>▪ All county departments are managing their missions well and not bringing unnecessary public scrutiny due to internal mismanagement</li> </ul>	<p>The Department has support from the county manager's office to pursue Accreditation and other goals associated with it (e.g., re-organization, emphasis on public health policy, etc.) but management should continue to confirm this support over time with regular updates, meetings, etc.; support must never be taken for granted.</p> <p>Engagement with the board of supervisors needs to be carefully considered and pursued with the guidance of the county manager's office</p>
Community Partners  (allied healthcare, K-12 and post-secondary education, state & local government, tribal organizations, public research groups, child advocacy organizations, emergency response & service and other NGOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assistance with private hospital health assessments</li> <li>▪ Partnerships and assistance with meeting tribal member healthcare and nutrition needs</li> <li>▪ Partnerships that allow for better public awareness of programs offered at the state and local government level</li> <li>▪ Assistance in changing K-12 policy and student needs regarding exercise, nutrition, etc.</li> <li>▪ Assistance in public health policy and programs at college and university level</li> <li>▪ Assistance, partnering with a public health network providing nutritional advice for children and families</li> </ul>	<p>The Department has done excellent work in identifying and organizing community partners into Cloud groups through the CHA and CHIP components of the Accreditation process. These partners and the systems established to support them will serve as an essential, ongoing way of fostering collaborative Department support and determining the needs of the community.</p> <p>Efforts to expand this group in the future or finding other ways to establish relationships with other community stakeholders is important to better understand the public health landscape within Maricopa County and to identify new partners to further support the Department's initiatives</p>
Patients/Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ They receive the best medical care that's available at the time</li> </ul>	<p>The Department does an outstanding job in delivering services to a variety of clients and customers including individuals that have few options to consider (e.g., low</p>

(Clinical Services, WIC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ They are receiving timely and accurate testing results</li> <li>▪ Their families, especially their children are receiving nutritional food and health conscious advice in a timely manner</li> </ul>	<p>income families, homeless, uninsured). Engagement with these patients and customers is done on a daily basis. The Department should consider communication avenues to better tell the story about what they do for children and families. Although the political environment is conservative, there are moderate and progressive areas of the County that will respond positively to this message.</p>
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Disease, food-borne or toxic outbreaks</li> <li>▪ General health hazards</li> </ul>	<p>The Department has developed strong and sustainable systems for crisis and emergency response to all manner of public health emergencies. As partnership opportunities increase and expand as a result of HIPMC and other efforts, the Department should consider ways for community partners to tell the positive story about these efforts to protect and inform County residents.</p>

## Appendix B: General Communications & Accreditation Action Plan & Messaging Recommendations

Communication Opportunity	Audience	Accompanying Messaging	Responsible Party	Actions & Timing
Accreditation Education & Awareness	Department Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We are developing a sustainable and healthy community</li> <li>▪ Accreditation is a change with purpose that will increase the entire Department's standing and reputation</li> <li>▪ Accreditation gives all employees the opportunity to begin on the "first floor" of the Department's efforts to achieve a national standard for service and performance – an opportunity for professional renewal</li> <li>▪ Accreditation will not result in the sacrifice or loss of programs</li> </ul>	Communications staff  Accreditation staff  Director  Senior Management	Jan. '14 – Dec. '14 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish ongoing agenda item in all senior management, cloud and Department meetings</li> <li>▪ Use of NACCHO video/PowerPoint presentations adapted for Department meetings</li> <li>▪ Placement in online newsletter with regular updates</li> <li>▪ Training of staff on Accreditation Committee and select individuals to serve as communication ambassadors to strategically determined areas</li> <li>▪ Placement of Accreditation FAQ's at each employee's work area</li> <li>▪ Consider E-announcements from the Director to each employee</li> <li>▪ Careful consideration of Clinic/WIC should be given re: training, updates</li> </ul>
	County Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We are developing a sustainable and healthy community</li> <li>▪ Accreditation is a change with purpose that will increase the entire Department's standing and reputation</li> <li>▪ We are a department that can be trusted with public funds</li> <li>▪ Our policy and healthcare decisions are made with the customer in mind</li> </ul>	Director	Jan. '14 – Dec. '14 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Continue updates and checks for support confirmation thru county manager and sr. county management</li> <li>▪ Consider select but regular briefings with county supervisors under advisement from the county manager (Accreditation site visit team will interview board members)</li> </ul>
	Community Partners (allied healthcare, K-12 & post-secondary education, local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We are developing a sustainable, healthy community</li> <li>▪ We are one in the same with our community partners;</li> </ul>	Communications staff  Accreditation staff	Jan. '14 – Jan. '14 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Continue HIPMC process</li> <li>▪ Continue use of HIPMC online newsletter; consider</li> </ul>

	& tribal organizations, NGO's, etc.)	protecting and serving the public with quality healthcare and education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We are creating a public health department that serves a resource and a partner for our hospitals and healthcare providers because we must have a sustainable public health network county-wide</li> <li>▪ Accreditation is a change with purpose that will increase the entire Department's standing and reputation</li> </ul>	Director	greater placement of Accreditation updates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Consider strategies to better engage community partner management &amp; CEOs such as having the Director brief a community partner's management team at their location</li> <li>▪ Continue establishing relationships with non-HIPMC ACO's</li> <li>▪ Establish relationships with research organizations such as local and national think tanks (e.g., the Morrison Institute, the Center for the Future of Arizona, etc.)</li> </ul>
General Awareness, Perception of Department	Department Staff County Management Community partners Patients & Customers General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ We are developing a sustainable, healthy community</li> <li>▪ We are one in the same with our community partners; protecting and serving the public with quality healthcare and education</li> <li>▪ We are a department that can be trusted with public funds</li> <li>▪ Our policy and healthcare decisions are made with the customer in mind</li> </ul>	Communications staff Accreditation staff Director Senior Management Department staff	Jan. '14 & ongoing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Senior management should capitalize on employee commitment to the Department and use current organizational change as a means of re-assuring staff that changes are for the better and will help County residents</li> <li>▪ Create opportunities for the Director to meet directly with new and current employees, HIPMC partners, ACOs and other organizations of value to the Department, using activities such as "Brown Bags with the Boss", "Bringing the Health Department to your organization" or one on one meetings</li> <li>▪ Continue current communication activities that promote positive press stories or educate during crisis communications</li> <li>▪ Continue public health policy work and market availability of health assessment tools (i.e., epidemiology statistics, etc.)</li> </ul>

