

ASTHO STAR Center for Administrative and Organizational Excellence

Peer Assessment Program Guide for Public Health Agencies

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About ASTHO

Incorporated in 1942, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) is the only national, nonprofit organization representing the nation's state and territorial public health officials and the agencies they lead. ASTHO is committed to supporting the work of state and territorial public health officials and furthering the development and excellence of public health policy nationwide. Membership is comprised of 59 chief health officials from each of the 50 states, Washington, D.C., five U.S. territories, and three Freely Associated States. ASTHO also supports peer communities of state and territorial health leaders and senior executives in health departments who work with the over 100,000 public health professionals employed at state and territorial public health agencies. ASTHO's primary functions are to develop strong and effective public health leaders, improve public health through capacity building, technical assistance, and thought leadership, and advocate for resources and policies that improve the public's health and well-being while aiming to promote the advancement of equity and optimal health for all.

About STAR Center for Administrative and Organizational Excellence

The [ASTHO STAR Center](#) is created to provide technical assistance to improve state, territorial, and freely associated state health agency (S/TFAS) administrative readiness using evidence-informed capacity indicators and best practices for managing organizational change. For purposes of this work, *administrative readiness* is defined as the ability to apply fiscal, legal, and administrative authorities and practices that govern funding, procurement, contracting, and hiring efficiently and effectively to respond to both population health improvement needs and address emerging public health threats. Deficiencies can delay the acquisition of goods and services, the hiring or assignment of response personnel, the disposition of funding, and legal determinations needed to implement protective health measures. The goal of the STAR Center is to connect health officials and their leadership team with peers, subject matter experts, and consultants and provide in-depth technical assistance, skill-building, and business process improvement using strategies and approaches that focus on modernizing and strengthening administrative and organizational infrastructure. In providing services, the ASTHO STAR Center uses a structured process that consists of five phases designed to support and strengthen an organization's culture, systems, and operations.

1. Vision Setting: Establishing a vision for success
2. Engagement: Invest leaders and generate stakeholder support
3. Assessment: Assess current system and identify areas of improvement
4. Planning: Develop and implement a change plan
5. Evaluation: Evaluate and iterate

Questions about the ASTHO STAR Center should be directed to performanceimprovement@astho.org.

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Purpose of this Guide

The Peer Assessment Program Guide is intended to guide jurisdictions through each step of the assessment process and to help prepare staff for the Site Visit with the Peer Review Team. This Guide also serves as a resource for public health agencies seeking more information about the program prior to applying.

Peer Assessment Program Overview

The ASTHO STAR [Peer Assessment Program](#) is a voluntary assessment process and a service provided through the [ASTHO STAR Center for Administrative and Organizational Excellence](#). The Peer Assessment Program utilizes the STAR Center's five phase approach (vision setting, engagement, assessment, planning, evaluation) beginning with visioning and engagement in the initial application and assessment process. After the site visit, technical assistance with action planning and an evaluation is conducted. The assessment is conducted by a Peer Review Team trained by ASTHO to use their public health experience and expertise to conduct the assessment and make recommendations for performance improvement based on evidence and best practices. It is designed to be a point in time assessment of a public health agency's administrative and organizational capacity against evidence-informed indicators. Engagement of peers in the assessment process allows for mutual benefits of sharing valuable insights and building new collaborations to improve administrative readiness across all public health agencies. This program does not confer a certification or accreditation designation. For purposes of this program, *administrative and organizational capacity* refers to a health department's ability to marshal, develop, direct, and control its financial, human, physical and information resources to fulfil its mission.

Benefits of the Peer Assessment Program

The Peer Assessment Program provides an opportunity for the public health agency to review and assess their current administrative capacity against evidence-informed indicators, consider challenges and opportunities, and prioritize and focus resources to improve in these areas. By engaging both internal and external partners, agencies can utilize a systems-oriented, problem-solving approach, and improve partnerships by facilitating situational awareness and enhancing capacity in business management and acumen. In addition, the assessment program provides the opportunity for agencies to think creatively about solutions and adapt policies and processes to different public health threats or emergencies.

Administrative leaders from public health agencies across the country conduct the assessment and provide recommendations based on their experience, expertise, and best or promising practices. Based on the findings and recommendations identified by the assessment, public health agencies can request technical assistance from ASTHO to assist with action planning and implementation of improvement opportunities. By participating in the program, public health agencies are strengthening infrastructure and foundational capabilities, accelerating their path to administrative readiness, and contributing to the evidence-base in this area to benefit the public health profession in modernizing infrastructure.

Depending upon availability of funding, ASTHO may cover expenses associated with the site visit. There is no fee to participate in the Peer Assessment Program. The public health agency is responsible for ensuring leadership and staff participation including coordination of site visit logistics, such as securing interviewees, space, and technology for conduct of the site visit.

How the Peer Assessment Program Differs from Public Health Accreditation

The ASTHO STAR Center Peer Assessment Program is a technical assistance opportunity for public health agencies that specifically focuses on assessing and improving administrative and organizational capacity. This program does not confer a certification or an accreditation designation. Data and information are provided by a public health agency based on capacity indicators to provide a peer review team with a point-in-time snapshot of administrative capacity, and an opportunity to make recommendations to improve. In contrast, public health accreditation is administered by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) and assesses whether a tribal,

state, local and territorial health department is meeting standards and measures to effectively provide the Ten Essential Public Health Services, used to designate a five-year initial accreditation or reaccreditation status. In other words, Accreditation looks at what you SHOULD BE doing while the Peer Assessment Program looks at HOW you are currently doing it and HOW you can do it better. The Peer Assessment Program may be used to complement a public health agency accreditation program by doing a “deeper dive” on core administrative processes, providing recommendations for improvement, and opportunities for further technical assistance to modernize or advance a public health agency’s administrative and organizational capacity.

Administrative and Organizational Capacity Indicators

The Peer Assessment Program utilizes a core group of capacity indicators to define public health agency administrative and organizational capacity. The capacity indicators are used to assess and improve the core administrative processes needed most to support delivery of the 10 Essential Public Health Services. The capacity indicators are organized into ten (10) themes identified below:

1. Human Resources Management
2. Workforce Development
3. Information System Management
4. Facilities Management
5. Accounting, Budgeting and Audit
6. Procurement of Equipment, Supplies, and Services
7. Administrative Policy and Planning
8. Communications
9. Performance Management/Quality Improvement and Evaluation
10. Learning Organizational Efforts and Innovations

Each area has corresponding capacity indicators that are used by the public health agency and peer reviewers to help assess and quantitatively define current administrative and organizational capacity. The indicators are used as a foundation for collaborative discussion about what is working well and areas that require improvement to modernize the agency’s administrative infrastructure and operations. Public health agencies interested in applying for a peer assessment of their agency’s administrative capacity will have the opportunity to review the capacity indicators and program requirements prior to submitting a formal application.

Annual Program Timeline

The Peer Assessment Program is conducted annually according to the following general timeline. The number of public health agencies that participate in the assessment is dependent upon funding.

Program Milestone	Timeline
Public Health Agency Application Deadline	6 weeks after Program Announcement
Public Health Agency Selection	4 weeks after Application Deadline
Peer Review Team Selected	3 weeks after Public Health Agency Selection
Peer Review Team Trained and Onboarded	3 weeks after Peer Review Team Selected
Program Review Materials Submitted to ASTHO	4 weeks after Peer Review Team Trained and Onboarded
Planning meetings (2) and virtual calls (3) between Peer Review Team and public health agency team	From 2 weeks after Program Review Materials Submitted to ASTHO to 2 weeks prior to the Site Visit
Site Visit	21 weeks after Public Health Agency Selection

Application and Selection

Preparing for the Application

In preparation for the application and to understand the level of commitment needed to participate fully in the program, public health agencies should complete the following steps:

1. **Obtain support from the Health Official to apply for the assessment.** It is important that the health official and leadership team are engaged up front and understand the basis for the peer assessment is in the spirit of improvement. A Letter of Support from the health official must be submitted along with the application and include (1) approval from leadership to apply for the assessment and a statement of commitment to complete the Peer Assessment Program; (2) a description of how agency leadership will be engaged in activities; (3) a listing of key administrative staff and their roles with the agency.
2. **Identify a member of the agency's executive team to sponsor the initiative and act as a liaison between the public health agency assessment team and the Health Official.** Among their roles and responsibilities, the executive sponsor will support the team's activities and outcomes, remove barriers, liaison to the health official, and assist in reaching out to external partners for Site Visit interviews. Ideally, the executive-level sponsor will have experience and expertise in leading administrative areas and this individual should be different than the public health agency's team lead for the assessment process.
3. **View the informational webinar hosted by ASTHO prior to the Open Application period.** The webinar will cover the assessment process, what public health agencies can expect, and a deeper dive into the capacity indicators. This live presentation will be recorded for future viewing and all applicants will be required to indicate on their application that they have viewed the webinar and understand the expectations for public health agency staff.
4. **Utilize the readiness tool to reflect on their organizational capacity and identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.** The readiness tool is also intended to strengthen the public health agency's understanding of the capacity indicators to maximize the advantages of participating in the program. It is an internal document only and will not be submitted during the assessment.

Submitting the Application

The public health agency application should be completed with input from the health official, agency's executive leadership team, and other key staff. In the application, public health agencies will:

- Describe the agency's ability and capacity to participate in the assessment and include information about how it is positioned to implement recommended improvements.
- Describe its vision and goals for strengthening administrative and organizational capacity.
- Complete a high-level Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis, and based on the results, identify 1-3 priority areas to focus on for the assessment.
- Describe how the work of the assessment will address priorities in the agency's organizational strategic plan.
- Identify leaders or stakeholders (internal and external) that are part of the system needed to support your agency's administrative and organizational capacity.

The following documents are also required to complete the application package:

- Letter of Support from Health Official
- Current organizational chart
- Organizational Strategic Plan

Public health agencies will upload their application package as one PDF through an online form.

Selection to the Program

For each cohort, 1-2 applicants will be selected based on the scoring criteria identified on the application. The individual indicated as the contact person on the online application form will be notified in writing regarding their agency's selection to the program. Upon selection, ASTHO will schedule an orientation with the public health agency staff to meet the team and provide guidance for the next steps. During this meeting, participants will discuss completion of a Peer Assessment Charter to define goals, priority areas for the assessment, expectations, and commitments to participate in the Peer Assessment Program. The charter will act as an agreement between ASTHO and the public health agency to complete the assessment process, and ensure engagement of leadership, staff, and partners. In addition, it provides formal approval to initiate the program.

Preparing for the Site Visit

Program Review Materials

The Program Review Materials lay the groundwork for the assessment and the Peer Review Team will use the information provided as conversation starters to dive deeper into the priority areas and related capacity indicators. The information provided by the public health agency should be clear, relevant, factual, and detailed so that the Peer Review Team can maximize the effectiveness of the Site Visit interviews and ensure findings and recommendations for improvement are most pertinent to the agency. The goals of the Program Review Materials are to:

- Orient the Peer Review Team to the public health agency's administrative programs and organization, and to external agencies that impact its administrative processes.
- Collect information about the capacity indicators and apply them to the agency's public health practice.
- Consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that impact each priority area under assessment with a focus on the challenges and inefficiencies.
- Prepare the Peer Review Team for the Site Visit.

The public health agency will receive the Program Review Materials template following the orientation with ASTHO and will complete and submit the template to ASTHO ten weeks prior to the scheduled Site Visit.

Pre-Site Visit Virtual Calls with the Peer Review Team

In preparation for the Site Visit, the public health agency team lead will meet with the Peer Review Team Lead for two planning calls to discuss the public health agency's goals, build relationships, and discuss key staff and partners to be interviewed at the Site Visit. Following these meetings, the full public health agency team and Peer Review Team will participate in two 1-hour virtual meetings to review the assessment and Site Visit process, provide the Peer Review Team opportunities to ask clarifying questions about the public health agency's Program Review Materials and priority areas, and finalize Site Visit interviews. Depending on project needs, the Peer Review Team has the option to ask for a third virtual call.

1st Virtual Call: Public health agency team and Peer Review Team will meet to review the assessment and Site Visit process. The Peer Review Team will have an opportunity to request additional information or clarification on priority one.

2nd Virtual Call: The Peer Review Team will have an opportunity to request additional information or clarification on priorities two and three from public health agency staff.

Optional 3rd Virtual Call: Peer Review Team will have the option to ask for one more virtual call to request additional information or clarification on items that need to be reviewed before the site visit.

ASTHO will work with public health agency staff and the Peer Assessment Team to schedule the calls through ZOOM. All participants should ensure they have access to the platform and have video and microphone capabilities on their computers to fully participate in the meetings.

Identifying Key Staff and Partners to Interview

The Site Visit interviews are opportunities for the Peer Review Team to meet face-to-face with key staff and partners and gain insight on the public health agency’s priority areas from varying perspectives. ASTHO recommends that interviews are conducted with both internal programs that conduct work in these areas and external partners that may drive policy and procedures. During the pre-site visit planning calls, the Peer Review Team will provide suggestions or ideas for adding or removing potential interviewees from the public health agency’s list.

The number of interviews and who is interviewed will be guided by the agency’s priorities for the assessment and specifically the components that are identified in the Program Review Materials as weaknesses and opportunities. To keep the Site Visit on schedule and allow for in-depth interviews, ASTHO recommends no more than 10 panels of people (individuals or groups) to be interviewed.

It is the responsibility of the public health agency to:

- identify key staff and partners to interview.
- ensure their availability for and attendance at the Site Visit.
- and prepare participants for the interviews.

Examples of External Interviewees	Examples of Internal Interviewees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governor’s Office and/or State or Executive Level Budget Director • State Administrative Agencies external to the Health Agency (IT, HR, or Business functions) • Legislator or Legislative body that makes administrative policy decisions • Local public health agency or association • Hospital or health system • Other key partners that receive funds routinely for programmatic and administrative services and for emergency response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Official • Super Agency Administrative Director • Members of the Executive Leadership Team including those with programmatic oversight • Administrative Leaders and Directors (e.g., Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Human Resources Director) • Performance Improvement Director • Key administrative staff and subject matter experts

Developing the Agenda

The public health agency is responsible for putting the Site Visit agenda together in consultation with the Peer Review Team. A sample agenda is found in the appendix and can be adapted by the public health agency lead and Peer Review Team Lead to fit the needs of the agency and partners. The Site Visit will occur over 3 ½ days and include the following components:

Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Kick off meeting with Peer Review Team and public health agency staff ✓ Interviews with public health agency staff
Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Interviews with partners ✓ Interviews with public health agency staff
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Report writing
Morning of Day 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Report out of assessment findings and recommendations. Attendees should include the State/Territorial Health Official, and staff and partners that participated in the interviews

Site Visit Logistics

Conference Rooms for Interviews and Peer Review Team Base

The Peer Review Team will need meeting space to conduct interviews and write the report. When selecting the space, consider how many people will be in the room in each interview and ensure the room is large enough to fit everyone comfortably. The interview room may be different than the meeting space used for the Kickoff or Report Out meetings. A second meeting room should be reserved for the Peer Review Team to use as a base, where they can meet and write the report, take breaks, eat lunch, and keep their belongings.

The room(s) should have:

- Access to audio/visual technology and plenty of outlets
- Table tents for public health agency staff being interviewed to include name and program
- Table tents for external partners being interviewed to include name and organization/agency

Peer Reviewer Informational Packet

The public health agency will provide the Peer Review Team with a packet of information prior to the Site Visit to include:

- Information for traveling between the airport and hotel, and between the hotel and health department)
- A list of restaurants and other options for quick lunches
- Contact information for key state personnel
- Directions for connecting to internet and local printers (if guests connecting to the internet or printers is not possible, ASTHO will work with the public health agency to consider other options)

Timeline of Pre-Site Visit Activities

What	Purpose	When
Public health agency team Orientation with ASTHO	Meet and greet with team, provide guidance for next steps, discuss Charter and completion to initiate the assessment.	20 weeks prior to site visit
Submission of Program Review Materials	Public health agency team submits Program Review Materials to ASTHO.	10 weeks prior to site visit
<i>Planning meeting</i> - Public health agency team lead and Peer Review Team Lead	Meet and greet between the public health agency lead and Peer Review Team Lead to build relationship. May discuss goals, review application materials, or important information or issues that should be considered in preparing for the site visit and final report.	8 weeks prior to site visit
<i>Planning meeting</i> - Public health agency team lead and Peer Review Team Lead	Public health agency lead and the Peer Review Team Lead will review the key administrative staff and partners to be interviewed at the Site Visit and finalize the agenda.	6 weeks prior to site visit
<i>1st Virtual Call</i> – Public health agency team and Peer Review Team	Public health agency team and Peer Review Team will meet to review assessment and Site Visit process. The Peer Review Team will have the opportunity to request additional information or clarification on priority one.	4 weeks prior to site visit
<i>2nd Virtual Call</i> – Public health agency team and Peer Review Team	Peer Review Team will have opportunity to request additional information or clarification on priorities two and three.	3 weeks prior to site visit
<i>Optional 3rd Virtual Call</i> – Public health agency team and Peer Review Team	Peer Review Team will have the option to ask for one more virtual call to request additional information or clarification on items that need to be reviewed before the site visit.	2 weeks prior to site visit

Site Visit

Purpose

The purpose of the site visit is to verify and supplement information presented in the public health agency application and Program Review Materials. It provides an opportunity for the Peer Review Team to learn as much as possible about the health agency and conduct in-person interviews with key internal and external partners to benefit assessment of administrative and organizational capacity. The Peer Review Team will spend 3 ½ days on location with the health agency. During the Site Visit, the Peer Review Team will meet with public health agency staff, interview administrative teams and key partners, and write up and share assessment findings and recommendations. ASTHO recommends the Health Official and administrative program leadership to be present for the report out session. Any information shared by staff and partners during the interviews and by the Peer Review Team at the report out session will be considered confidential.

Kick Off Meeting

The Site Visit Kick Off Meeting is held with the Peer Review Team on the first day of the site visit. The Peer Review Team Lead facilitates the meeting and conducts introductions of the Peer Review Team, ASTHO staff, and public health agency staff, and others invited. The public health agency is then invited to provide an overview of the agency and as it relates to administrative and operational capacity. This is the agency's opportunity to tell their story and include information that wasn't captured through the application and summary document submission. They may also include any recent changes or developments pertinent to the assessment or capacity indicators since they submitted their summary document. If the public health agency prioritized Facilities Management, a visual walk-through of the agency's primary location may take place during this time as well.

Interviews

On Days 1 and 2, the Peer Review Team Lead is responsible for facilitating interviews, ensuring time management, and that the questions asked are pertinent for the report and recommendations. Interviews may be conducted with a panel of people or with individuals and will last up to 40 minutes. During introductions, the interviewees should identify their role and how they work with the public health agency. The remainder of the time is allocated for the Peer Review Team to ask questions and take notes. The Peer Review Team member responsible for the priority area in review is ultimately responsible and leads questioning.

Writing the Report

On Day 3 of the Site Visit, at the conclusion of all interviews, the Peer Review Team will draft the report of findings and recommendations for improvement. In writing the report, the Team will consider the following:

- The initial application, including goals of the assessment, and weaknesses and opportunities identified
- Current status of the capacity areas and available resources
- How much is the agency doing? How well are they doing it? Is anyone better off? Are they moving in the right direction?
- What needed improvements emerged as part of the interviews?
- What improvements are within the health agency's control, and which may need partnerships?
- What recommendations will help the public health agency meet its goals for the assessment process?

Each report section will include a 1-page narrative status, lists of strengths, challenges, and recommendations that are measurable and actionable.

Site Visit Report Out and Closing

On the morning of Day 4 of the Site Visit, the Peer Review Team will report out to the public health agency staff on the findings and recommendations in the report. Attendees should include public health agency staff and

representatives, the Health Official and any other guests or partners the agency would like to include. Following the Peer Review Team’s presentation, attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions about each section of the report.

Following the Site Visit, the public health agency will receive an electronic copy of the report and recommendations and will have 30 days to review the report for factual inaccuracies (e.g., data, dates, names, etc.). The public health agency can also request a follow-up call with the Peer Review Team during the 30-day review period for clarification on findings and recommendations. The final report will not be distributed or used by any person except the public health agency and all information obtained from pre-site visit through post-site visit is subject to ASTHO’s confidentiality guidelines.

Also following the Site Visit, the public health agency will respond to ASTHO’s evaluation on the assessment process, if participation was helpful, and if the capacity indicators were relevant to their public health practice. The public health agency will respond to a second evaluation 6 months post-assessment to determine if the public health agency was able to adopt recommendations and make progress with implementing improvements.

Action Planning and Additional Technical Assistance

In alignment with the cycle of continuous improvement, the public health agency may decide to develop and adopt an action plan to implement the improvement opportunities identified in the report. Within 60 days of the Site Visit, the public health agency can request assistance from ASTHO to develop an action plan and select priorities for change. Included in this assistance, the public health agency may also receive one year of quarterly coaching calls and technical assistance from expert consultants, the Senior Leader Reserve Corps, and ASTHO, on change management and implementation of the action plan. The public health agency’s charter will be amended to identify agreed-upon goals, objectives, participants, and outcomes, and will formally initiate additional technical assistance.

Contact Us

For any questions on the Peer Assessment Program, please email ASTHO at STARPeerAssessment@astho.org.

Appendix A: Peer Assessment Program Flow Chart

