



Accreditation

One of the most challenging performance benchmarks for Roanoke Fire-EMS to demonstrate for CALEA assessors was response time when a call comes in.



Grueling achievements send positive message to Roanoke residents

Commission on Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), making it one of only 46 E-911 centers out of 6,500 nationwide to bear this distinction.

By **CHRISTINA KOOMEN**

The Treasurer's Office was accredited in July 2008 by the Treasurer's Association of Virginia. The Police Department was re-accredited last July, after first being accredited by CALEA in 1994. Roanoke's Fire-EMS Department, which was internationally accredited for the first time in 2002 by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International, received re-accreditation in July 2007. International accreditation has been conferred on only 113 out of 56,000 departments. And the Roanoke City Jail, first accredited in 1991 by the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections, was re-accredited in 2006. Just last spring, the jail received similar recognition from the National Commission on Correctional Health Care.

There is widespread agreement that one of the primary benefits of gaining accreditation is the positive message it sends to the community. "Accreditation assures your citizenry that they have a department that is operating as efficiently, as effectively, and as professionally as it possibly can," says Parks and Recreation Director Steve Buschor.

Leaders of Roanoke's accredited departments talk about the process being "a change agent" and producing "cultural transformation."

There can be less obvious benefits

to the locality as well. For example, Capt. Chris Perkins with Roanoke's Police Department notes, "Accreditation can serve to limit an agency's liability and risk exposure because

CALEA accreditation demonstrates to insurers, and all aspects of the judicial system, that the agency meets internationally recognized standards for law enforcement."

But striving for accreditation is not for the faint of heart. It takes lots of planning, lots of paperwork, and no small amount of soul-searching. For any government departments thinking of taking the plunge, here are some things to bear in mind.

Anticipate about 2 years to complete process

For its first foray into accreditation, the Police Department began studying the process in 1985, applied to CALEA in 1989, and formed a full-time accreditation team of four sworn officers in 1992 to see it through. But in general, two years seems to be the average. In the case of the Treasurer's Office, the fact that they needed two strong annual audits meant that two years would be the minimum time-frame, regardless of when other steps were completed.

Two years might seem like a long time, but accreditation is not the kind of project that can be put on a shelf and dealt with as schedules permit. Parks and Recreation officials created a detailed matrix outlining when each



Some of the strongest of Roanoke's Parks and Recreation programs are its many activities for young people, such as the always popular soccer leagues.

standard should be checked off, and held more than 50 semi-monthly meetings of its accreditation team to keep things on track. As Parks and Rec's Recreation Superintendent Vic Garber puts it, "Once you send the application, the clock starts ticking."

Know what you're getting into

Although there can be some crossover in accreditation standards (example: having a mission statement), specific mandates for accreditation can vary quite a bit. For the Treasurer's Office, there were nine key criteria that needed to be met. For starters, the city's treasurer needed to complete the Master Governmental Treasurer certification program administered by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, and three staff members needed to go through the Certified Deputy Treasurer program. The remaining criteria covered areas such as having written customer service policies and achieving certain tax collection percentages.

At the other end of the spectrum,

the city's Public Works department has "in excess of 500 aspects that need to be addressed for the accreditation process," according to Director Bob Bengtson. Not having filed an application yet, the department's special projects coordinator has already been chipping away for a couple of years at assembling the information needed to go forward. "It has clearly been a heavy load for him," Bengtson notes.

A visit to your accrediting agency's Web site can be a good place to start.

Documentation is the name of the game

"It's pretty cut and dried what you have to do to achieve accreditation, and for the most part the city was already doing a lot of the things it needed to do," says Roanoke Treasurer Evelyn Powers. "The hard part was putting together all the documentation."

Parks and Rec officials agree that their department was already addressing many of CAPRA's standards, but the documentation proved extensive: a written compilation of policies and procedures wound up consuming

two 6-inch volumes. "That's where I spent my evenings and weekends," Buschor quips. Another phenomenon to be prepared for is the domino effect: documents tend to beget more documents as new issues arise. Parks and Rec wound up with a dozen major new planning instruments.

When Roanoke's Fire-EMS Department built a new main fire station in 2007, it dedicated an entire room with its own computer work station to house and organize the extensive records related to accreditation. "A lot of it's electronic, but a lot of it's still paper and you have to have it indexed and kept up-to-date," says Technical Services and Administrative Deputy Chief Billy Altman.

One of the challenges Altman noted in coordinating the process the first time around was combining the documentation contributed by different Fire-EMS divisions into one cohesive whole. It was not just a matter of formatting the master report, but making sure the reporting was consistent – not a simple task when you're dealing with some 600 pages of content.

'Show' is as important as 'tell'

While documentation is critical, what accrediting agencies really want to know is: Do you do what you say you do? Some demonstrations, like fire response, are more challenging than others. "We said our first company arrived at a residential fire scene in four minutes, while the rest of the alarm arrived in eight minutes," Altman describes. "The agency said, 'How do you know? Show us.' So we had to figure out how to show them. We say we do it, we know we do it, but you've got to be able to show you do it."

Buschor and Garber recall members of the CAPRA visitation team peering into the closets of their recreation centers to confirm one of its benchmarks. They also recall the visitation team expecting not merely a demonstration of one of the standards, but records that proved the procedure had been in place for at least a year.

Networking can be useful

One of the first things Parks and Recreation did to get the accreditation ball rolling was invite Doug Cherry from Virginia Beach to give staff a reality check at its kickoff accreditation meeting. This gave them a chance to get a lot of questions answered by someone who had been down this road before. Garber wound up spending a lot of time in contact with fellow parks and recreation officials in Virginia and



Roanoke Treasurer Evelyn Powers became a certified Master Governmental Treasurer as part of her department's accreditation process.

North Carolina getting their feedback about what the CAPRA board was really looking for in terms of meeting its standards. Buschor had the opportunity to sit in on a board review in Washington for other parks and rec agencies, which provided insight into that phase of the process.

And networking can work both ways. One Parks and Rec staffer signed up to be a future CAPRA visitation team member. And other recreation departments are already looking to Roanoke's Parks and Rec for guidance: members of the team that assessed Roanoke last summer requested copies of some of the department's new planning documents to use as models in their communities; and Garber has been invited to consult with a recreation department in California about its own upcoming accreditation process.



Roanoke's new main Fire-EMS station houses administrative offices, including a room dedicated to accreditation materials.

Involve your employees

Some localities hire outside consultants to shepherd them through the accreditation process, but there is much to be said for giving employees a role. For one thing, no outsider understands the day-to-day realities of your operations like the troops on the front lines. For another, employees gain from the experience in ways that last well past the award itself.

"The thing that was unique about this process was that it brought together people from all parts of our department who don't traditionally work together, so they got to know one another, how they work and think. That kind of team-building is invaluable," says Parks and Rec's Buschor.

Treasurer Powers noticed a similar effect when she asked her staff for their input and suggestions about policies and procedures. "We took a hard look at how we do things, and I think it made the employees feel valued to know that their judgment and their knowledge were important to this process. It makes them feel like it's worth coming to work each day, that they're not just going through the motions."

Accreditation also offers new opportunities to work cooperatively with employees in other departments.

Don't forget about budget

Accreditations don't come cheap. Even if departments don't farm out work to a consultant, there is a cost just for applying to the proper authority. These costs are generally based on the size of the locality or the size of the department.

"We have not incurred any significant direct costs, but at such time as we actually need to pay accreditation fees we will need something in the range of \$10,000," Bengtson says.

The department applying for accreditation could also have to foot the bill for travel, meals, lodging, rental cars, etc., for the accreditation team that makes the eventual on-site visit. This, too, can run into thousands of dollars.

Fire-EMS Chief David Hoback says some fire departments have



Roanoke Parks and Recreation staff and members of the CAPRA visitation team spent time at Roanoke's Mill Mountain Discovery Center during their accreditation site visit in July 2008. Among those pictured are Director Steve Buschor (front row, far right), and Recreation Superintendent Vic Garber (back row, second from right).

dropped their accreditation because of the costs. Right now his department has put on hold some of the staff training that will be necessary for re-accreditation in 2012 because the money isn't there, although it could be in the future.

Accreditation takes maintenance

Accreditations aren't forever. Most "expire" in one to five years, and departments need to reapply if they want to maintain accredited status. In some cases, there are also periodic reviews to prepare for.

"We were a lot better prepared in 2007 than in 2002. There were very few issues that the accreditation team had to address," says Chief Hoback. Deputy Chief Altman adds, "We have our files set up, we have a dedicated computer, and we take steps to update the materials as we go. We'll have to do some tweaking depending on the standards, but when accreditation rolls around again, 90 percent of the work should already be done."

Requirements, however, can change, and departments won't be able to just fall back on their original materials. In the case of Fire-EMS, multiple outside agencies, such as ISO and OSHA, help to set nationwide guidelines for fire operations, which in turn affect accreditation standards. One example: more stringent health evaluations for firefighters.

Vicki Babb, accreditation manager for Roanoke's E-911 Center, reports, "We have just received the second-edition standards manual that includes a new chapter for Critical Incidents, Special Operations, and Homeland Security. Our department has made a commitment to accreditation. Now we have to enhance what we already do well."

One fellow recreation official from Miami told Buschor that the five-year re-accreditation was harder than the initial award because "by the fifth year they assume you know everything!" If nothing else, you have your own expectations to contend

with: "It begins all over – and you raise the bar!" says Parks and Rec's Garber.

Whether you make it or not, the effort pays dividends

Buschor notes that during the two years they were working on accreditation Parks and Rec won more state awards for programs, facilities and administration than ever before in its history. He credits the "culture of success" that striving for accreditation fostered among his employees.

Roanoke's Planning, Building and Development Department launched the process of getting its Building Inspections Division accredited, but ran into a snag due to a requirement regarding structural plan review that would involve additional costs, and possibly the participation of an outside professional. Nevertheless, Director Tom Carr says the work has not been in vain.

"Even if we decide not to pursue accreditation the process has been beneficial to us. It has helped to review nearly every aspect of how we conduct our inspections program, and we have compared ourselves to other inspections programs to help us

identify what we can do better. As a result, we have already documented all of our inspection processes, looked at how we can apply best inspection practices, and have promoted the qualification and training of our personnel. All of these things help lead us to more consistent, progressive and accurate inspection services that benefit our customers."

Bengtson concurs. "Aside from the recognition and achievement itself, my expectation is that by documenting all of our processes, we will have created a 'succession planning' tool useful for future generations of public works leaders in our organization."


Then again, achieving accreditation is pretty great

Parks and Rec Director Steve Buschor has vivid memories of



Staff from Roanoke's E-911 center attended their accreditation ceremony in Atlanta in March 2008, including Director Mike Crockett (front), Training Coordinator Melissa Williams (third from left), Supervisor Sherre Oakes (behind Crockett), and Accreditation Manager Vickie Babb (second from right).

the moment when he and his staff received the actual award of accreditation from CAPRA at its conference in Baltimore last fall. "You could feel the pride, you could feel the energy, you could feel the incredible sense of accomplishment," he remembers. "Accreditation creates a sense of professionalism and confidence. That in and of itself was worth the journey."

Kind of like being master of the universe. 

About the author

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