

FUNCTIONS OF WI BOARDS OF HEALTH AND BOARD MEMBERS

Boards are faced with a dilemma: On one hand, a board of health is responsible for the public's health and a local public health department; on the other hand, popular sentiment sometimes tells the board to stay out of administration and not to interfere. How is a board of health to meet its responsibilities if it does not interfere at least some of the time? Some boards choose to meddle anyway. Others take such a hands-off approach that the local administrator must guess the board's values and directions. Consider how hard it is for local administrator to decide on a course of action, only to discover later that his or her actions were unacceptable. Still other boards set policies that guide administrators toward board goals but leave the methods (within stated limits) to the individual administrator. Boards that choose the latter approach are able to uphold their immense responsibility in an equitable fashion by being fair to both the administrator and the community.

Policy-Making Versus Operations

Boards get entangled in staff activities in a variety of ways. For example, staff may bring things to the board because no guidelines exist for making a decision that the board will accept. Board members ask for staff reports and may attend staff level meetings. Some boards find themselves enmeshed in an issue due to a member's curiosity or expertise. No matter how important any of these situations are or may seem, they are staff level work. While decisions in these situations may serve the organization, they do not guide it. It must be remembered – boards of health are responsible for policy issues not operational issues.

Board should focus their interest on the effectiveness of staff work. Do staff activities achieve the board's goals? The best way for a board to achieve results is by intentionally not looking at day-to-day operations but rather at achieving its goals in a lawful, ethical and prudent manner.

When staff work requires board approval for legitimacy, the staff is not empowered. The board must free itself from staff decisions by explicitly detailing everything it could never approve and thereby implicitly approving all other staff actions. Where there is security for the board and flexibility for the administrator, everybody wins.

Who is Responsible?

AREA	BOARD OF HEALTH (Policy)	DIRECTOR/HEALTH OFFICER (Operations)
Long –term goals (taking more than one year)	Approves	Recommends and provides input
Short-term goals (taking one year or less)	Monitors	Establishes and carries out
Annual report and plan	Approves	Assesses, develops and carries out
News media releases	Adopts policy; support public health position	Approves all media releases
Day-to-day operations	No role	Makes all management decisions
Budget	Approves	Develops and recommends
Capital purchases	Approves	Prepares requests
Decisions on building renovation, leasing, expansion, etc.	Make decisions; assumes responsibility	Recommends; signs contracts after board approval
Purchases of supplies	Establishes policy and budget for supplies	Purchases according to board policy; maintains an adequate audit trail
Major repairs	Approves	Obtains estimates and prepares recommendations
Minor repairs	Establishes policy, including amount that can be spent without board approval	Authorizes repairs up to predetermined amount

AREA	BOARD OF HEALTH (Policy)	DIRECTOR/HEALTH OFFICER (Operations)
Emergency repairs	Works with administrator	Notifies board chairperson and acts with concurrence from chair
Cleaning and maintenance	No role (oversight only)	Sets up schedule
Fees	Adopts policy	Develops and sets fee schedules
Billing, credit and collections	Adopts policy	Proposes policy and implements
Hiring of staff	Hires administrator only	Approves hiring of all subordinate staff
Staff development and assignment	No role	Establishes
Firing of staff	Fires administrator only	Approves firing of all subordinate staff
Staff grievances	Establishes a grievance committee	Follows grievance procedures
Personnel policies	Adopts	Recommends and administers
Staff salaries	Allocates budget line item for salaries; approves yearly percentage increase	Approves salaries with recommendations from supervisory staff
Staff evaluations	Evaluates administrator only	Evaluates supervisory staff

Responsibilities of Board Members

These expectations may be adapted to reflect your board's actual expectations of its members. Your board can adopt any of these and add others as needed. What is important is that all board members know what is expected of them.

Specific expectations of board of health members:

Assess

- Educate yourself on your community and its public health status. As a county resident, you are in an excellent position to know your community's problems and needs.
- Educate yourself on your board and local department's history, goals, achievements, and current situation.

Develop Policy

- Review statutes, administrative rules and local policies.
- Attend board meetings regularly and promptly.
- Review all meeting materials in advance of meeting.
- Do assigned work between meetings.
- Participate fully in open, constructive dialogue regarding local public health both in and out of meetings.
- Ask critical questions; seek clarity and implications of decisions before voting.
- Function as a policy-maker not as an administrator.
- Link the community and the local health department.
- Represent public health to the community.
- Speak for the board only when delegated to do so.
- Actively participate in political activities at local, state and national level concerning local public health.

Assure

- Keep decision-making at the primary and secondary policy levels.
- Stand behind decisions of the board and its director/health officer.
- Inform the community of public health financial backing.
- Anticipate trends likely to affect the local health department.

Evaluation

For evaluation to be effective it must be formalized. The board and the director/health officer need to agree on how and when each will be evaluated. The board needs to define what it does and what responsibilities it delegates to the director/health officer. Until the board clearly defines its own role, it will be unable to evaluate fairly. Evaluation needs to be on the performance of the director/health officer.

Board Evaluation

Boards need to rate their own performance. Did the board set a long-range work plan? How well did it do in accomplishing its objectives? What did the board do that was not listed as a target? What remains to be done? What is the new work plan?

Boards should also assess the meeting evaluations from the past year. What are common problems? Where has improvement been made? What goals should be set for next year?

How long should a person serve on a local board of health? Board members need to address this question; each board must find its own answer. Individually, members should ask themselves certain simple, but searching, questions about their continued involvement:

1. Am I still interested?
2. Do I participate actively and responsibly in board matters?
3. Do I attend the regularly scheduled board meetings?
4. Do I have confidence in the board, the administrator, and the health department staff?
5. Is my service on the board at least as satisfying and rewarding as any other service to which I might devote similar time and effort?

Boards, as a whole, need to consider how length of tenure influences board effectiveness.

Director/Health Officer Evaluation

The director/health officer's job is to make the board's policies come alive. Therefore, evaluating the director/health officer is also evaluating the local department and the state of public health in your county or district. The board hires the director/health officer to run the department and to achieve public health goals. While the board should be clear about what

results it wants to see in the community, it should not direct /health officer's day-to-day management of the local department.

The board of health should annually review the health department director/health officer's performance. The board should evaluate its director/health officer just as a supervisor does with an employee. Supervisors measure and communicate actual performance based on planned expectations; they pay for the value of the employee and provide a framework for the professional development of the employee's ability to do the job. Evaluation of an employee should be a regular part of staff development, regardless of an organization's size.

Performance-based evaluation is an excellent way for boards to evaluate a director/health officer's and to evaluate themselves. Such evaluations allow individuals and organizations to see how well responsibilities are being fulfilled. The board should look at each statement in the job description and indicate how the director/health officer fulfills that expectation. It is unfair to judge or rate a director/health officer on things that are not included in his or her job description. (The same goes for the board when it is evaluating itself.) Additionally, the board needs to state clearly its standard of performance for each evaluation item. A review of this type may reveal that job descriptions need to be created or updated.

Compare the director/health officer's job description and work plan to his or her accomplishments. Stick to the direct evidence and be clear about what is to be evaluated. If the board, in the absence of policy prohibiting such activities, disapproves of certain methods used to complete a task, the board has identified a policy need, not a director/health officer failing. Boards must look at outcomes of staff work, not at how staff does its work.

If your county requires a standard evaluation that is not performance based, consider also evaluating your director/health officer by the performance method. Standardized forms are appropriate for most evaluation situations but may be inadequate or inappropriate for a board's evaluation of its director/health officer. Standard forms must be general enough to apply to many positions, so they may omit important or specific aspects of more complex positions.

Several things are important to stress in evaluation:

- The evaluation must correlate to the actual job.
- Specific definitions of “Superior,” “Average,” “Acceptable,” etc., must be agreed on before the evaluation.
- Schedule the evaluation activities into the board agenda over the year.
- Summarize the evaluation in writing and provide an opportunity for the director to record his or her comments.
- Stick to job performance, not personal characteristics.

Additional responsibilities of a president or chairperson of a board of health:

- Chair all meetings.
- Facilitate discussion and decision-making.
- Work with director/health officer to set agenda for meetings.
- Counsel and consult with the director/health officer.
- Speak for the board as delegated by the board.
- Represent the board to other groups.
- Consult with board members who are not fulfilling their responsibilities or who are violating law, policy or practice.
- Initiate annual evaluation of the director/health officer.
- Initiate annual evaluation of the board.

The president or chairperson of the board must exhibit leadership ability and provide direction to the director/health officer and the health department staff. How long the chairperson should serve, is best decided by the board itself. When selecting a chairperson, the board needs to look for someone who is active and concerned with the issues of the health department. The chairperson may be called on to go to county governing bodies to support health department concerns and issues. The person selected for this leadership position should be someone who has the time, energy, and savvy to work within county government to represent the concerns of the board and the health department.

Tips on Being a Good Board Member

Some basic tips on ways to be a good board of health member are listed below:

- Work cooperatively with your director/health officer. Rely on his/her technical expertise and do not duplicate his/her efforts.
- Do not assume that your health board or health department can instantly solve all problems. Proper enforcement procedures do take time. Identify priorities and coordinate resources at all levels.
- Be willing to take a stand on important health issues, even if it means disagreeing with the governmental board that appointed you.
- Learn to make necessary decisions, even in the midst of adverse public reaction.
- Know the difference between private problems and those that actually have impact on the public.
- Seek out information from all possible sources before making important decisions.
- Do your homework: read pertinent records, memos and budgets before board meetings.
- Volunteer for appropriate local health department service programs; it gives you valuable firsthand insight into the program you are sponsoring and provides valuable assistance to the local department as well.
- Communicate frequently with your director/health officer and with representatives of your governing body. You can make valuable allies, as well as find out important information ahead of time.
- Be a health proponent in your community. Promote your board of health and your health department.
- Do not make promises to constituents without real knowledge of the board of health or health department's ability to keep them.
- Take an active role in planning and zoning issues; you may be able to stop potential problems before they start.
- At all times, even in times of crisis, the director/health officer (or appointed staff) should serve as the liaison to the media, not a member of the board of health. The health department staff will have the latest information and will have the best grasp of any technical information that must be translated for the public.
- Your role as a private citizen setting local health policy is important to your community.
- Make sure the board of health complies with the Open Meetings regulations.

- Enjoy your work and remember you are essential in providing public health services and protection of health in your community.

Adapted: Associations of North Carolina Boards of Health and Indiana Boards of Health
Orientation Manual for Illinois Boards of Health Members