

# INSIDE ICC

International Accreditation Service (IAS)



## Building Departments Agree: Accreditation Promotes Top-Notch Service

**T**he International Accreditation Service (IAS), a member of ICC's Family of Companies, introduced the Building Department Accreditation program in 2005.

In the past decade, many building departments in communities of all sizes across the nation have earned accreditation from IAS. These building departments have achieved a level of performance that has enabled them to deliver exceptional service to their communities. Yet, the jurisdictions that have been accredited—and re-accredited—in those early days are realizing the greatest value from the program.

For example, the city of Rochester Hills, Michigan, is one of the first building departments to earn accreditation. Scott Cope, director of the city's Building Department, said accreditation helped the agency deliver quality service during the recession, despite the loss of staff.

"Our quest for accreditation was timely," he said. "When the recession came along in 2008, our building department, like many other public agencies, went through significant changes. We lost half of our staff, which challenged our operational capabilities, but not our community's expectations for quality, timely services. The lessons learned and best practices we implemented all those years ago have helped us continue to meet the needs of our community and our own defined goals for service."

Selso Mata, Director of Building Inspections in Plano, Texas, agrees. IAS accreditation helped his jurisdiction identify and implement opportunities that drive a high-



performance organization and encourage professional growth, while raising awareness of building codes and safe building practices.

Because of accreditation, he said, "Our job tasks and procedures became much more consistent. We're more aware of how our day-to-day activities can be affected

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by changes in our community. We're better able to flex with changing demands or fluctuating economic conditions."

The Clark County (Nevada) Department of Development Services received its accreditation in October 2009. That allowed the county to continually develop their best practices, said Ron L. Lynn, Clark County's director and building official.

"It gives us a chance to learn about, and adopt and adapt best practices put in place by other jurisdictions in the global community—something that would otherwise be almost impossible to achieve," he said.

### ACCREDITATION BASICS

The IAS Building Department Accreditation program is modeled on an international peer review process. IAS building department evaluation teams are made up of practicing building officials, as well as code and accreditation professionals. Following the receipt of the building department's application and fees, the accreditation process begins with scheduling of an on-site pre-evaluation visit to take stock of the department's existing level of compliance. The department is provided with a detailed list of findings and with an opportunity to fine-tune their processes before IAS returns for a full evaluation.

Lynn says his department first opted for accreditation because the process was an "opportunity to have your people, processes and technology reviewed by an outside, very knowledgeable team, which allows for a level of objectivity that can't be achieved by someone within an organization."

Achieving accreditation requires that an organization

establish long-term management systems and service goals focused on continual improvement. IAS uses criteria in 13 accreditation categories to assess building departments. These include basic jurisdictional information, department staff, permitting, budget, construction codes, plan reviews, professional credentials/licenses, inspections, certificates of occupancy, on-site evaluations, annual reports, service goals and complaints/appeals.

Throughout the accreditation process, IAS evaluators also assess critical elements of the building department, such as customer service, code interpretation and enforcement, and fiscal strength. Teams of IAS-trained evaluators, assess the building department's expertise and its compliance with the IAS Accreditation Criteria for Building Departments/Code Enforcement Agencies (AC251).

### LONG-TERM PERFORMANCE

The Rochester Hills Building Department used the accreditation evaluation process to develop performance measures for plan reviews, as well as to track plan review errors and analyze rejection/approval rates.

Cope continues to use performance measures to track service goals and report the results to the mayor. Now that the economy is improving, Cope continues to put established and continually improving processes and procedures to work.

"For the first time, I can use the reports that compare our service goals versus actual performance to justify staff increases," he said. "We're able to show the amount of work the current staff is able to complete in a given time frame."

### Best Practices for Building Departments

IAS and the ICC Major Jurisdiction Committee have compiled a list of best practices learned from building departments across the country into the *Best Practices: Lessons Learned from the Building Department Accreditation Program and Major Jurisdiction Committee*. The booklet highlights best practices in seven critical building department categories: plan review, permitting, inspection, management/administration, legal, customer service, and information technology. Every category includes an overview of the Accreditation Criteria AC251 criteria that applies as well as a demonstration. For instance, AC251 addresses plan reviews in two sections—Plan Review: 3.3-Staff Information and 5.0-Plan Reviews. After a short description of the AC251 requirements, the authors outline several techniques used by various building departments to better manage, streamline and simplify the plan review process in a timely manner.

Chuck Ramani, IAS President added; "The Best Practices booklet is a resource for building departments of all sizes and scopes. It's a knowledge base of proven tools and techniques used by accredited building departments as a way to deliver efficient, cost effective and reliable services to the community. It's our goal, through accreditation and shared knowledge, to support building department services across the country and thereby ensure the safety of communities."

From the performance report, Cope said the mayor and city council have the information to decide whether the service goals are satisfactory, and if not, what needs improvement.

"I can show exactly where we're at and where we want to be," Cope said. "In fact, for the first time, I was able to get the go-ahead to add a staff member with no objections from anyone on the city council. That is big. In the

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past, it's been very difficult to hire someone because we haven't had the metrics to really prove the need."

To that end, over the last three years, Cope's department has added six people to support plan review, inspections and permitting and comprehensive training programs recommended by accreditation evaluators helped fill critical lost positions with very little coaching.

"It's been a relatively smooth transition to bring someone on board," he said.

**RAISING AWARENESS**

A building department receives a certificate of accreditation once it has met all IAS criteria. But it doesn't end there. Building departments must undergo annual reviews to maintain accreditation and are required to complete a full review by IAS every three years.

That helps Clark County stay on top of its game, Lynn said.

"I believe our procedures and workflows are very good, but it's important for us to refine our processes and best practices and make sure that our staff has the tools and training to do what we say we will do, when we say we'll do it," he said.

"I want our organization to be the best. We are an international city with 45 million visitors every year. We can't afford for anything to go wrong. Accreditation and its inherent required procedures and practices help ensure that high level capability."

And re-accreditation is much easier the second time, Mata said after the Plano Building Department of Inspections earned it in 2014.

"The renewal process is a really good time to make sure that we've documented personnel changes, shifts in code applications and policies," he said.

Mata said re-accreditation is also a good time to evaluate best practices from other communities and build awareness of all the things the department does well.

"Often times, a community's building department flies under the radar," he said. "Now, with a renewed focus across the industry on building safety and the credibility of accreditation, our community is better able to understand our role in safe building practices." **BSJO**



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