GUIDE TO CHOOSING AN ACCREDITATION BODY IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE
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Guide to Choosing an Accreditation Body in Behavioral Health

What is Accreditation?
Accreditation is the process of inviting outside experts to conduct a review of your organization to validate and improve the care, treatment or services you provide for the individuals you serve. The accrediting body generally conducts some type of review of your policies and procedures to measure compliance with a set of accreditation requirements (often called standards) provided by the accreditation body. An on-site survey is often part of the process, where external reviewers tour the facilities, examine records and possibly interview staff and individuals served.

Why achieve accreditation?
Why achieve accreditation has been compared to asking:

“Why get good grades in school?”
“Why seek restaurants who have passed their health inspections?”
“Why buy USDA Grade A beef?”
“Why read Consumer Reports reviews?”

Like those situations above, accreditation is a visible symbol of an organization’s commitment to quality and safety, as verified by an external process. It increases stakeholder and community confidence in the quality of care provided, and assures those seeking services and their families that your organization is meeting acceptable standards for the care, treatment or services you provide.
**Benefits of accreditation**

In addition to being a credible “report card” for your community, accreditation has additional benefits. It may also provide:

- **Opportunity to review and strengthen your practices:** Accreditation helps organizations create a culture of excellence based in continuous process improvement. As accreditation requirements are modified to reflect current thinking in the field, they allow organizations to stay on top of changing practices.

- **Reimbursement and contracting advantages:** State agencies, private insurers and Medicaid plans may use accreditation as a condition of payment, licensure or contracting, so accreditation may help open doors to more contracts and/or funding sources.

- **Networking and referral advantages:** Accreditation provides an opportunity to join a network to create referrals, collaborate or form partnerships. It can also help attract physical health care or other business partners as well as investors.

- **Improved Differentiation:** Accreditation may provide organizations with a competitive edge in their marketing by helping to differentiate them in a crowded market.

- **Continuity Enhancement:** Accreditation creates a framework for the organization that supports growth and provides guidance for leadership. It helps create a business model that can be replicated across programs and services, staff, and sites.

- **Risk Mitigation:** Accreditation can help reduce an organization’s risk exposure and may qualify the organization for a reduction in their liability insurance, or help with frivolous lawsuits.
What to Look For when Choosing an Accreditation Body

Accreditation is a significant undertaking for most organizations that needs careful consideration. While Joint Commission accreditation may not be the answer for everyone, we feel organizations should consider the following as hallmarks of high-performing accreditation bodies.

7 Characteristics to look for:

1. **Relevancy**: The accreditation process should support accreditation requirements and processes that positively impact your organization’s care, treatment and services and provide an accreditation that is recognized and respected in your field.

2. **Customization**: One size does not fit all, so look for a process that takes into account your unique organization and the population(s) you serve. Non-prescriptive accreditation requirements give your organization flexibility to best choose how to meet the standards in a way that works with your mission/vision, settings, services and staff.

3. **Educative Process**: Staff learn best in an open and honest environment, so the tone of the survey is important. It should be an engaging and consultative event, not an exercise in making check marks on a list. An interactive process that involves staff and persons served will produce better results than a review of written policies/procedures.

4. **High Standards**: Accreditation requirements that embody the highest clinical/quality standards for individuals served will help your organization take the care, treatment or services you provide to a new level.

5. **Organizational Oversight**: A process that looks at your entire organization may be best positioned to help you identify and improve issues with cross-functional organizational systems. It may also help inform leadership about the performance of their systems and align organizational priorities for improvement.

6. **Process Improvement Focus**: A culture of excellence starts with a commitment to continuous process improvement. Accreditation should help your organization establish policies, procedures and practices in support of this through an emphasis on using data to improve outcomes for individuals served.

7. **Value**: Accreditation is more than just a certificate on the wall. It is an investment in the future of the organization that should bring value. Your accrediting body should be well recognized by state authorities, Medicaid plans and insurance carriers, with a reputation that will enhance yours to assist in future partnerships and referrals.
Important Questions to Ask
Besides knowing what to look for when choosing an accreditation body, organizations should be asking important questions about the accreditation body, the on-site surveyors and survey, the process and the customer support and resources available.

Questions

...About the Accrediting Organization:
- Is the accrediting company experienced, stable, and well-respected?
- What is their reputation, and will associating with them benefit ours?
- Are leading organizations listed among their customers?
- Are they recognized as meeting any requirement we are subject to, or with our contracting/funding sources?
- Can they provide references or connect us to referrals?

...About the fees
- What is the total cost of accreditation, including surveyor travel, application fees, etc?
- Do you pay all at once or is it spread out over the accreditation period?
- What is the accreditation period?

...About the On-Site Survey
- Is the on-site survey consultative, balanced, and relevant to what we do?
- Will they visit all of our locations, or just some?
- Will the survey be a positive learning experience for our staff/team?
- Does the accrediting body have a method for reviewing our processes in real time, or is it more of a records review?
- What is the accreditation decision time frame -- Will we know where we stand after the survey? If not, how long until we hear?

...About the Surveyors
- Who are the surveyors, and what are their qualifications?
- Are the surveyors trained and supervised to be consistent in their approach?
- On average, how many organizations per year does a surveyor see?
- Will the surveyors have enough experience to be able share with us any good practices they have seen?
More Important Questions to Ask

...About the Standards
- How are the standards created, and by whom? Does the field have input?
- Will the standards help us excel operationally and develop good practices in our field?
- Are the requirements prescriptive or non-prescriptive?
- Can we meet their requirements for accreditation within our desired time frame?
- How do we resolve any findings after the evaluation?

...About the Process:
- How long will the process take? The preparation?
- Can they meet our expected time frame to become accredited?
- Is there a requirement for a “track record” of compliance before the survey?
- What is the accreditation period, and what is required in the years between surveys?
- What are the conditions for denial of accreditation? What is the most frequent reason accreditation is denied?

...About the Customer Support and Resources:
- What kind of resources for assistance are available? Are they comprehensive and easily accessible?
- Are there tools available to make the process easier?
- Are there educational programs or publications available?
- Can I get answers quickly? Do their staff answer their phone?
And just in case you were going to ask:

The Joint Commission

The Joint Commission is an independent, not for profit, non-governmental organization, and has been accrediting behavioral health organizations since 1969. We currently accredit or certify over 20,000 organizations in the US across the health care continuum. The Joint Commission is widely respected as the highest level of performance recognition available in the behavioral health field.

- Over 2200 behavioral health organizations are proudly Joint Commission accredited, ranging from small, single-service providers to some of the largest organizations in the field, such as Hazelden/Betty Ford Foundation, Valley Hope, Devereux, Burke Center, and more. You can find a list of accredited providers at [www.qualitycheck.org](http://www.qualitycheck.org).
- The Joint Commission has been recognized as meeting requirements for, or for use in lieu of licensure requirements by over 201 state agencies in 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. We are a deemed provider for CSAT for Opioid Treatment Programs and are widely recognized by insurers/payers, state Medicaid plans, investors and partners, and referral sources.

Accreditation Fees

- Fees are determined by the volume of individuals served and will include all costs, including surveyor travel. A cost worksheet is provided on our website at [www.jointcommission.org/BHCS](http://www.jointcommission.org/BHCS), or call us for an estimate.
- Costs are divided over the three-year accreditation period, with the majority (60%) due in the year we come out to do the survey, with about 20% each due in the following two years.
- Fees start at about $8500 total for the three-year period.

Accreditation Requirements

- Joint Commission accreditation requirements are well respected and widely considered to be some of the highest in the field.
- Our accreditation requirements are national, consensus-based standards put together by staff with many years of experience in the field. They are informed by our Behavioral Health Advisory Councils and Professional-Technical Advisory committee as well as through research and learning visits. New or revised standards are also posted to our website for feedback from the field and consumers/stakeholders.
- Our requirements are routinely updated to ensure relevancy to the field, including recent changes to integrated physical health care, human resource management, eating disorder treatment, and permanent housing support services.
- Our requirements are generally non-prescriptive, allowing you to determine how best to comply with them based on your unique scope of care and mission/vision.
Joint Commission Surveyors

- Our surveyors are a small group (under 40) of licensed professionals, employed by us part-time or full time.
- The surveyors participate in a full preceptorship, are trained regularly, and are highly experienced, averaging 12-16 surveys per year to best spread good practices that they have observed.
- Surveyors are carefully trained and supervised to provide a consistently high quality, educative survey experience.

The Joint Commission On-Site Survey

- Our Tracer Methodology is a highly-acclaimed way to determine standards compliance by “tracing” the experiences of those you serve as they interact with your organization and staff, using observation and interview to determine real-time compliance with applicable requirements.
- Our surveys are educative and consultative -- we strive to provide a consistently high quality, relevant survey experience every time you are reviewed and to provide feedback on areas where you and your staff are doing well in addition to areas for improvement.
- We will visit all sites providing 24-hour care. If there is a large number of locations, we may visit a representative sample of sites not providing 24-hour care.

The Accreditation Process:

- Our accreditation process is self-directed so that your organization can determine how quickly you’d like to proceed. Most organizations take 6 months or so to prepare. We do not have a requirement for a “track record”, so you need only show that you are compliant with our requirements as of the first day of your survey.
- A preliminary report of your survey findings will be reviewed with you at the close of your survey and left with you. A final report is then delivered in 2-10 days.
- If something is found not to be in compliance during your survey, you will generally have up to 60 days to become compliant and submit a report to us that you have met the standard. Our staff will help make sure this goes smoothly.
Joint Commission Customer Support:

- Comprehensive assistance from our Behavioral Health Accreditation team is just a phone call, click or email away, including free guidebooks, checklists and webinars to support you -- see jointcommission.org/BHCS.
- Our standards “help desk” provides a team of experts in our requirements who are available via phone or email to answer your questions about the accreditation requirements.
- A Joint Commission Account Executive specializing in Behavioral Health Care accreditation will offer ongoing support and schedule and prepare you for your survey(s).
- Additional publications, learning opportunities and an annual conference are available from our sister company at JCRinc.com.
- We’ll also create a secure web page for you called Joint Commission Connect where communications with us will be conveniently housed.

Why Choose The Joint Commission?

The Joint Commission’s Gold Seal of Approval™ means your organization has reached for and achieved the highest level of performance recognition available in the behavioral health field.
**FAQs about The Joint Commission**

1. **Can we meet your expected time frame to become accredited?**
   - In most cases, yes. Our timeline is flexible and depends for the most part on how fast you can be ready for survey.
   - We also have a 2-part survey process for new organizations that can survey the facility and render a “preliminary accreditation” decision prior to providing care, then complete the final accreditation process after the doors are open.

2. **What is the accreditation period?**
   - The accreditation period is three years

3. **Do we have experience with organizations like yours?**
   - The Joint Commission accredits over 2200 behavioral health organizations of all kinds, from small organizations with as few as five staff to large entities with hundreds of staff and multiple locations in multiple states. We accredit many of the leading organizations in mental health, addictions treatment, eating disorders and services for children, youth and families.

4. **Where can I get the accreditation manual?**
   a. 90-day trial access to our online accreditation manual is provided free of charge to organizations interested in accreditation, contact us for access at 630-792-5771 or see jointcommission.org/BHCS to register online.
   b. Upon applying for accreditation, full free access is made available.
   c. Extra licenses or print manuals are available for purchase at www.jcrinc.com

5. **How do I apply?**
   - Contact us and we’ll be happy to set up a log in and password to our electronic application.

“The Joint Commission Gold Seal tells our staff, our consumers, our payors, and our contractors that we mean business, that we mean quality. That by coming to us, they can expect a standard of excellence that’s driven by an organization that is synonymous for quality not only in our country, but around the world.”

Michael Flora, President and CEO
Ben Gordon Center, DeKalb, IL
Learn more about what makes The Joint Commission different:
view our “Apples and Oranges” infographic at:
www.jointcommission.org/Apples