

10 Steps to Selecting an Accrediting Body

Selecting a national accrediting body is a significant commitment for a human service organization. The commitment goes beyond the initial three- or four-year accreditation cycle and, in most cases, it continues for many more years, sometimes even decades. Because of the investment in time, money and effort involved, the selection process should not be taken lightly.

Accrediting Bodies

Behavioral healthcare organizations overwhelmingly chose from three main accrediting bodies: [The Joint Commission](#) (formerly JCAHO), [CARF](#) and [Council on Accreditation](#) (COA). Each emphasizes the critical elements of performance improvement, risk management, financial controls, client rights, culture of safety for staff and clients served, etc. Each conducts an onsite survey to determine the organization's level of implementation of the accreditation standards. However, there are significant differences between the three that impact the process and determine their "fit" with an organization.

Choosing an Accrediting Body

So, how do organizations choose between the accrediting bodies? Here are 10 key steps to help with the selection process:

1. Determine if there is a licensing mandate, a deemed status recognition, or a requirement from a private insurer. If so, is there a specific accrediting body that is preferred?
2. Partner agencies – are they already accredited? Would it be helpful if everyone is using the same accrediting body to ensure the same language and policies are being used throughout?
3. Is there a potential merger/acquisition on the horizon? Note that if an organization acquires another, the new organization can be folded into the accreditation previously held (generally through a limited, additional review). However, the accreditation cannot move "upstream" without a new application.
4. Is the agency medically based or looking for partnerships (or payment) from the healthcare market? The Joint Commission in particular is more medically-based, while CARF is very active in the healthcare market.
5. Determine the cost – accreditation fees vary between the three bodies, but should not be the sole consideration. There is always at least some variation to

- the cost based on the size of the organization seeking accreditation. The accrediting body will be happy to give you an estimate, so go ahead and ask.
6. Desire to accredit all programs or just one/some programs – CARF allows for one (or more) programs to be accredited at a time. The Joint Commission and COA only accredit all programs (the whole organization) at once.
 7. Determine your baseline — Take Accreditation Guru’s free Accreditation Readiness Assessment online at www.AccreditationGuru.com.
 8. See what’s required by each accrediting body: obtain and review their accreditation standards. COA’s standards can be found online at www.coanet.org/privatestandards. CARF and The Joint Commission will allow free access to their standards for a limited time (3-6 months). Both also have manuals available for purchase, and The Joint Commission provides free access to the standards once an organization has applied.
 9. Do you have a specific goal or time frame for accreditation? Call the accrediting body(ies) being considered and discuss such issues as programs to be accredited, their timeline, costs, etc.
 10. Check out their reputation — speak to agencies in the same county/state that are already accredited and ask them their opinion (pluses and minuses) of their accrediting body. You can often find a list of accredited organizations to talk to on the accrediting body’s website.

Once these steps have been completed, there should be a clearer understanding of which accrediting body is best suited for your organization. Then the real fun of preparing for accreditation can begin!