

Professionalizing a Profession

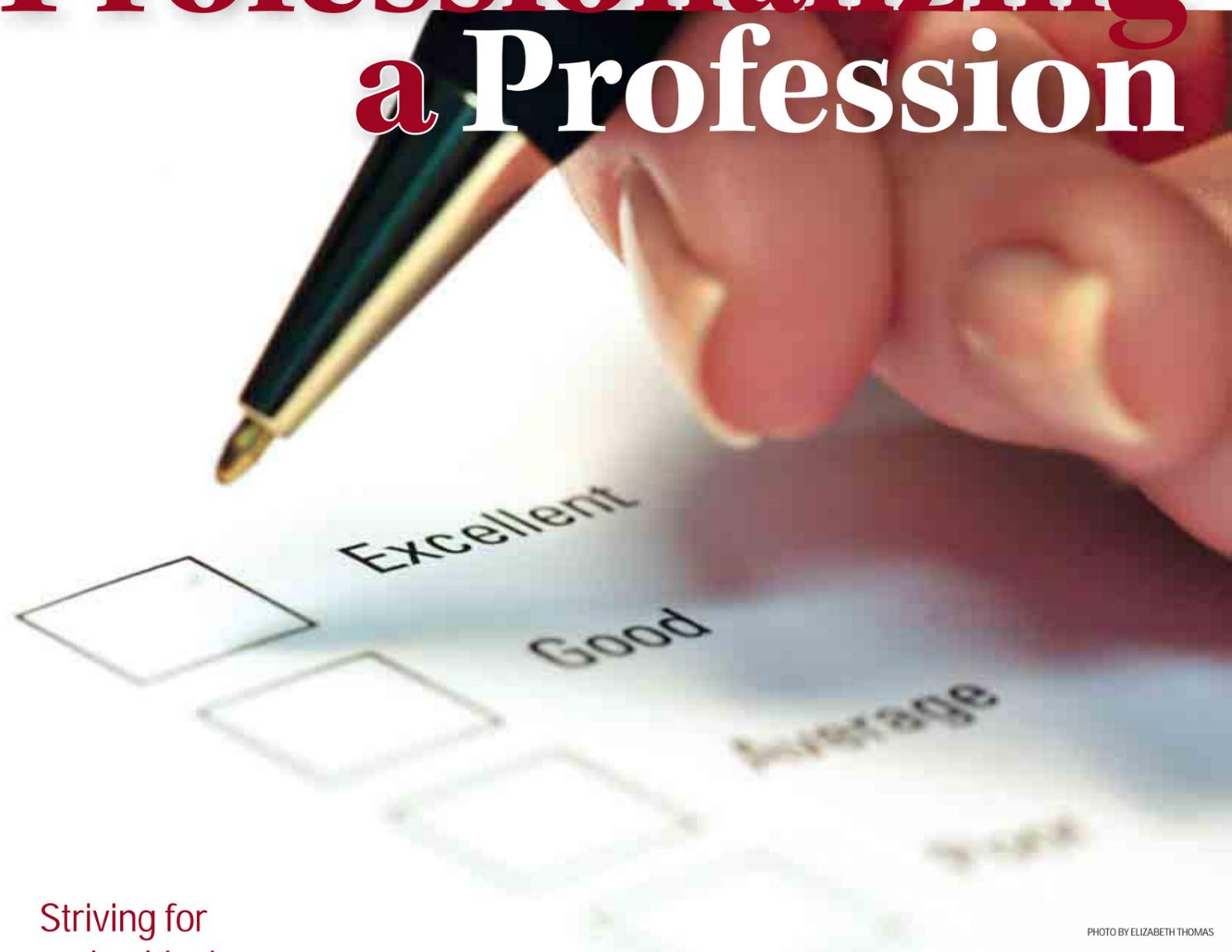


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Striving for and achieving accreditation sets a high standard for agencies and their communities

ABBIE DARST | PROGRAM COORDINATOR



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The world is changing at a dynamic pace and policing in this ever-changing culture has to evolve just as quickly to meet the demands of the fast-paced, technology-savvy, highly-driven communities today's law enforcement officers serve. Law enforcement agencies must be on top of their game to provide the best possible resources and security to their citizens.

But to what standard are they held in providing these services? How can their communities know they are getting the best possible service from trained professionals?

In Kentucky, nearly 80 agencies have turned to accreditation to define a standard for responsible, forward-thinking law enforcement practices.

"Accreditation boils down to two things," said Michael W. Bischoff, executive director for the Kentucky Association of Chiefs of Police. "It protects you liability-wise and it promotes professionalism within the department."

"It makes really good sense to go with the accreditation process because it shapes you up, makes you look at yourself, makes your [officers] look at themselves and makes you look at the department," said Morehead Police Chief James Adams. "It makes you become a better police department all the way around. You're better for your community, and it gives you a sense of pride, too."

KACP's Police Accreditation Program is intended to provide law enforcement agencies in Kentucky with an avenue for demonstrating that they meet commonly accepted standards for efficient and effective operations.

STANDARD OF EXCELLENCE

Accrediting its first agency in 1992, KACP has spent nearly 20 years helping Kentucky's agencies identify aspects of their policies, procedures, facilities and practices that are not allowing them to provide the best services or keep their personnel safe doing their jobs.

"It lets you take a fresh look at exactly what you do and how you're doing it, your processes and whether they're actually working or not," said Anchorage Police Chief Chris Winders, whose department completed its fourth, five-year KACP certification in December 2010.

In the early years of the program, Bischoff said the main focus was on policy — making sure policies and procedures were actually in writing because so few agencies had solid, written policies. As the idea of updated, concrete policies and procedures began to catch on, organizations such as the Kentucky League of Cities and Kentucky Association of Counties began developing model policies that agencies could use as a basis for policy and make adjustments specific to them, which helped tremendously in solving the policy issues that were prevalent before, he said.

The KACP accreditation standards seek to address all major and minor areas that can cause issues for a law enforcement agency, even areas that seem as if they should be common sense for any department, Bischoff explained.

"Sometimes we could assume that most people would have some of this stuff in there and that's a bad thing to do," he said. "There are a lot of people who question me asking why in the world do you need this standard, and I will give them a half a dozen instances as to why because there are agencies that did not have them for various reasons. ... It's there to protect you because where that is going to bite you is on that very major case, where if they can get it stopped right from the very beginning, it doesn't matter how well you did from that point on."

Morehead's Chief Adams agreed.

"There's a face on every rule," Adams said. "Somewhere down the line someone got sued real big and lost because of that."

Though policies and procedures still are major components of what the accreditation program assessors check, the overall program has moved beyond just policy and procedure, Bischoff said.

"Liability is probably the most important," he said. "If you are protected, if you have good policy and procedure, if you do the training on firearms and vehicle operations — the things that really get you into trouble with lawsuits — the professionalism comes along with it."

"I feel more confident that we are prepared for pretty much whatever — any kind of liability," Adams said. "We've got all those things covered. ... There is nothing really left to >>

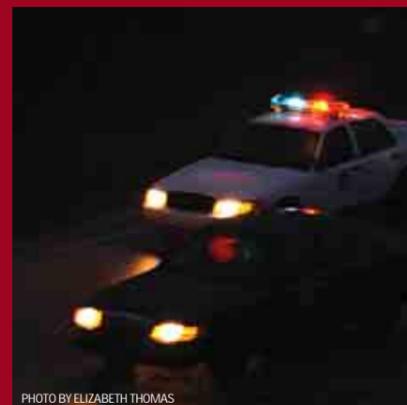


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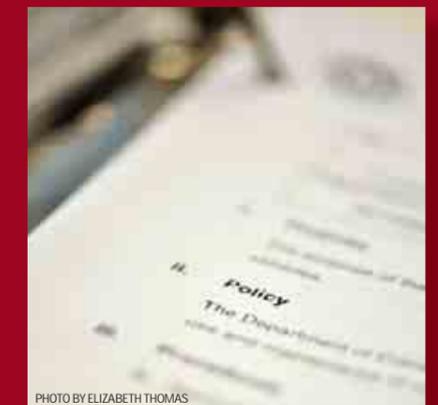


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Morehead Police Chief Mike Adams sits at his desk with the two large binders that hold the agency's policies and procedures, necessary for KACP accreditation. Morehead completed its third reaccreditation in April 2009.

Helping with an onsite assessment of the University of Kentucky Police Department, Anchorage Police Chief Chris Winders checks UKPD Officer Steve Dishion's patrol car for necessary safety elements, such as a reflective vest.

>> chance. You've got some kind of policy or procedure in place to cover anything that's going to happen.

The Morehead Police Department completed its third five-year certification in April 2009.

"For me, there is a sense of calm about that," he continued. "Everybody knows what we expect of them because that is part of the process."

REAPING THE BENEFITS

Accreditation doesn't just provide direction to the chief for where the agency needs to be, but is relevant to every officer in the department for their day-to-day duties.

"As an officer, I went from having very limited policies and procedures to having pretty good guidelines to follow," said University of Kentucky Police Chief Joe Monroe about how the agency's initial accreditation in 1996 affected him as a patrol officer. "Especially for the new, younger officer, it

is a great tool to have to help guide you in making decisions as well as understanding what's going on and what direction you need to take."

The professionalism that accompanies the process of accreditation can also create a heightened sense of security for the community, Bischoff said.

"One of the things we always heard was the patrol officer would come back and say, 'What's in it for me?'" Bischoff said. "Well, the thing is, to solve crime — we tell officers this: You can either observe it or you can have someone call you with information. If you have a professional department, the [citizen] is going to take the risk. If they know they have a professional police department, they will contact you.

"That is just one of the benefits," he continued. "It may not give you the raise you want, but it might give you the equipment you need to do your job better. For every one of the standards, we can sit down with them and explain how each one is for the benefit of the officer, to your citizens and to the department."

The boost of community confidence isn't the only thing personnel will see. The pride they take in their agency and work will get a boost, too, Monroe said.

"It is a big morale booster," he said. "It builds confidence in the employees — their effectiveness. They understand the efficiency of the agency. By having a good solid, strategic mission and values, they know what their goal is, so they know what they want to strive for."

In addition, the accreditation process requires agencies to look ahead, laying a plan of action for the next five years. For a municipal agency, when the city government wants to know what the department heads think is important, the agency already has its plans and needs compiled, Adams said.

"When budget time comes, I can show the mayor and council the things we've been planning for years," he said.



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LITTLE HURDLES

Despite the benefits associated with accreditation, there still are hurdles that departments face in beginning their own accreditation journey. Issues such as tight budgets, peculiar facilities and unsupportive city governments can hinder departments in the accreditation process, or keep them from even seeking accreditation at all.

"I would highly recommend it to any department," Adams said. "Even if there are monetary problems or if they are in a building that is extremely difficult to secure the way it is supposed to be, and they think they just really can't meet the standard. It would still be a good thing to try to go through the process as much as possible just to make your department more professional and better for your constituents."

As the chief of the 10-officer Anchorage department, Winders agrees.

"I'd tell them you need to go get accredited because even though you think you have policies that cover everything ... if you go through the accreditation process you will know that you have it covered," he said. "Even if they don't get accredited, if there are some things they just can't financially afford or just cannot do, at least go through as much of the process as you can because you will learn so, so much.

"But the thing about accreditation is there's not a lot of cost involved in order to do things right," Winders continued. "The materials you have to buy or the changes you have to make often are not that involved."

For Adams, he counts the costs of losing an officer if the agency's policies weren't in place.

"Your people are your biggest asset and if one of them goes down because they didn't have their gloves and they get Hepatitis or something and they're out, it cost us more than \$40,000 just to get someone hired, trained and onto solo patrol," he said. "If you have all your policies in place and make those tools available to them, it may keep them from being down for months or maybe forever. Just one of those things has multiple times paid for [accreditation].

"A lot of stuff is just good common sense, good police work, good sense to keep your men and women safe," he continued. "It makes you a better police department to do all these things, and if you cut corners, it's going to bite you. This keeps you from cutting corners."

For an agency facing the decision to seek its initial accreditation, there may be a lot of work ahead. Preparing for the first certification can be a very time-consuming task.

"The biggest problem is the amount of work and just taking the plunge," Winders said. "I think anybody can do it ... they are

Chris Winders checks cataloging specifics in an evidence room during an onsite assessment. As chief of the Anchorage Police Department, which received its fourth, five-year accreditation certificate in January, his expertise has led him to assist Mike Bischoff and the KACP staff in numerous onsite assessments over the past several years.

just scared of the amount of work it takes. The thing is, most police departments do what accreditation calls for, but they just do not document it real well and don't have the checks and balances on it."

There are numerous resources available to help ease the burden of beginning the accreditation process, from yearly training classes offered by KACP and model policies, to other agencies that have gone through the process and Bischoff and his staff, who are willing to help at every stage of the process.

"We always stress to any agency that has ever been accredited, that they are here to help another agency down the road," Bischoff said.

The pluses outweigh the time, effort and the little bit of money it takes, Adams said.

"It helps professionalize our profession, by making sure that you have good, solid policies and procedures in place," Monroe said. "There are some agencies in this state that don't have any policies and procedures, so this helps ... to make us even better and gain more recognition as professionals." J

Abbie Darst can be reached at abbie.darst@ky.gov or (859) 622-6453.



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