

Developing Standards for Accreditation

Stephanie Pacinella, MA<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** Standards development is a continuous process that relies on an inclusive, consensus building methodology to ensure that standards maintain relevance in an ever-changing field. This article provides an overview of the framework for the COA Employee Assistance Program Standards, and details the steps in the standards development process that resulted in both the first, and current editions of the *COA EAP Standards and Self-Study Manual*. Areas of emphasis for future standards development are described.

**KEY WORDS.** Accreditation, Employee Assistance Programs, Standards Development

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Pacinella, MA, is Assistant Director of Standards Development and Performance Measurement, Council on Accreditation, 120 Wall Street, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10005 (E-mail: [spacinella@coanet.org](mailto:spacinella@coanet.org)).

## Introduction

The Council on Accreditation (COA) first released standards designed for multi-service organizations providing employee assistance program (EAP) services in 1987. In 1999, COA partnered with the Employee Assistance Society of North America (EASNA) and created a separate accreditation product specifically tailored for internal and external EAPs. The standards that embody that product, the *Employee Assistance Program Standards and Self-Study Manual, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition*, were written explicitly for stand-alone employee assistance programs. The impetus for this separate product arose from a need in the field for standard practice guidelines to help describe a well functioning EAP. At the time of publication the field was largely unregulated, and many groups fashioned themselves as EAPs, but did not exhibit the components that define a true EAP. The Employee Assistance Professional Association (EAPA) terms those essential components the EAP Core Technology.

The COA EAP Standards are structured to encompass the EAP core technology and the process requires organizations to have those key elements in place to achieve accreditation. The standards that address the core technology elements provide a standardized framework for providing services that support positive outcomes for clients, and encompass the values that are important in the EAP industry. Key areas of the framework are: employee education and outreach; information and referral, and assessment and referral services; training for supervisors and union representatives, management/supervisory consultation; work-life services; short-term counseling; organizational development; critical incident stress management; and drug-free workplace services. Additional standards address areas vital to well-functioning

organizations and services, including: governance and administration; management of EAP human resources; health and safety; legal liability; quality improvement; contracting for services; personnel and affiliate competence; confidentiality and privacy protections for clients; conflicts of interest; and ethical considerations.

An open, democratic process is used to develop a product that incorporates these values and represents best practices in the EAP industry. The emphasis lies in a continuous consensus-building process to ensure that standards maintain their relevance in an ever-changing field. The COA standards development process includes several steps, as outlined below. Those steps, at times, may overlap, and on occasion may change order depending on the issue being addressed. The completion of a new book of COA standards generally spans two to four years from initiation of revision to publication, depending on the scope and nature of revision and the extent of new standards development.

### **Data Collection**

COA collects data from various sources on an ongoing basis to inform its standards development process. These sources include: feedback from accredited organizations and peer reviewers that conduct accreditation site visits; observations made by staff during visits to organizations; review of current research and survey data; information gathered at national conferences; input obtained from national membership associations; and the analysis of accreditation data. This information gathering helps staff to identify the standards that need revision or further development, as well as areas of practice for which new standards need to be developed. Throughout the development of COA's EAP Standards, COA received guidance from several leading EAP industry

groups including EASNA, EAPA, the EAP Roundtable, and the EAP Joint Industry Alliance.

### **Literature Review**

At the beginning of the process of developing a new book of standards there is a period of time that allows for an intense focus on researching and locating resources, and reviewing the literature that has been gathered; thereafter, literature reviews are an important, ongoing staff responsibility. During this time it is also useful to look at descriptive program material and to visit representative programs throughout the United States and Canada to observe organizational practices as they occur in the field.

### **Standards Advisory Panels**

COA engages experts in various fields of practice to review the standards and provide input throughout the standards development process. These experts are grouped together by field of practice and serve on one of several permanent, ongoing standards advisory panels. Panels consist of representatives from the field including: agencies; peer reviewers; board members; sponsoring and supporting organizations; policy and research organizations including colleges and universities; accreditation commissioners; and other relevant groups such as governmental entities, funders, and managed care organizations. In support of this vital consensus-building process, COA established a panel specifically to represent the employee assistance field.

The EAP Standards Advisory Panel represents a full range of perspectives from across the EAP field, including internal, external, large, small, private, public, American and Canadian EAPs. Approximately fifty stakeholders representing those various EAP

models attended the first EAP Standards Advisory Panel meeting in April 2002 to impart their knowledge and perspectives on EAP best practices.

The initial panel meeting occurs early in the process to allow panel members the opportunity to provide their feedback on the current standards and to solicit input on what needs to be revised or newly developed. Suggestions provided by the EAP Standards Advisory Panel for revision of the *EAP Standards and Self-Study Manual, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition*, focused on further development of standards for work-life services, online and telephone services, public model EAPs, and international EAPs, as well as the need for the separation of standards for affiliate providers from standards for staff members. Typically, panels will meet three times during the standards development process: prior to standards drafting, following the first draft of the standards, and again following field review.

### **Standards Drafting and Field Comment**

Although initial standards drafting occurs throughout the early phases of the standards development process, it is after the first panel meeting that staff work in earnest to develop the first draft of the manual. Following the panel's review of the first draft and incorporation of any changes, the draft is made available to the public for comment. Field review involves posting the manual for a specified period of time and notifying all agencies, peers, and other stakeholders of its availability and their opportunity to provide input. Postcards were sent to approximately 500 stakeholders in the EAP field to notify them of the EAP field comment period. The draft EAP manual was posted on COA's website in September 2002 for one month to allow visitors the opportunity to download it for review and comment. When the field comment period ends, the field response is

analyzed and standards are redrafted to incorporate input. At this point the panel is useful in an advisory capacity, but it is the staff that assume the vital role of weighing and balancing conflicting ideas.

### **Field Testing**

Field testing is done to ensure the highest level of effectiveness in the accreditation process. It may be carried out with specific standards, new service sections, or the entire manual when feasible. This evaluative process involves the participation of agencies using the standards in the accreditation process. The goal is to obtain feedback from the peer reviewers and agencies regarding the utility and design of the manual. This information is then used to assist COA in making refinements to the standards before official publication. When substantial revisions are made to the standards following this process, the panel may be engaged again to review those changes. The 1<sup>st</sup> Edition of the EAP Standards underwent a rigorous field-testing phase at five sites. The design and methodology of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition EAP Standards remained constant, so another field testing phase was unnecessary; all revisions and additions were vetted through the field comment period.

### **Production**

Production is the final fine-tuning and editing stage of standards development. This is a detail-oriented process that spans several months. This is the last opportunity to review standards language, the consistency and flow of each section of the manual, and to make edits and adjustments to the overall product. The production stage involves formatting the document into a user-friendly layout, multiple proofreadings, designing the artwork for the manual, and coordinating the separate documents that make up the

entire self-study manual. The final product, in this discussion the *Employees Assistance Program Standards and Self-Study Manual, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, published in Spring 2003, is a comprehensive blueprint of best practice principles.

### **Standards Updates**

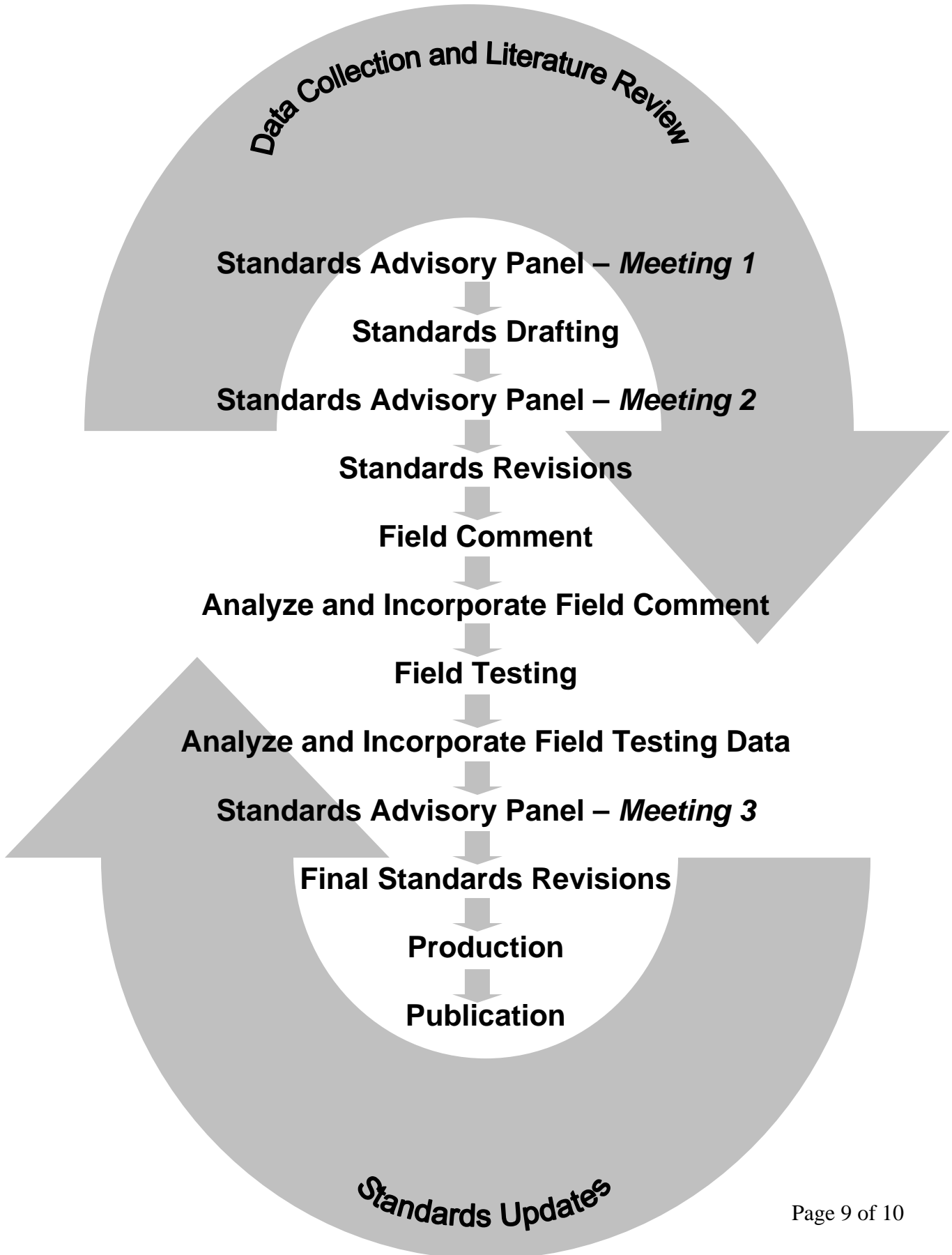
COA's mechanism for updating standards allows revision of a standard in need of substantive change during the time when a Manual is in current standing. For example, a Standard Update may occur because of a change in practice, the need for further clarification of a standard, or to provide additional flexibility to a standard. Updating a standard involves reviewing relevant literature on a particular issue, as well as consulting individuals both internal and external to COA. The information collected is reviewed and discussed thoroughly, and careful consideration is given in crafting the appropriate language for the Standard Update. Standards Updates are produced on a monthly basis, as needed, and posted on COA's website. In addition, copies of Updates are distributed to all organizations when they apply for accreditation, and to peers as part of the material they receive for a site visit. This process helps to respond to the field's needs and input on a more frequent basis outside of the lengthy manual revision process.

### **The Future of Standards Development**

COA maintains its course of standards development to further the evolution of each of the standards products. Focus for future standards development has pointed to evidence-based practices as a primary source of best practice principles. In addition, data collection increasingly will promote and support ongoing improvements in organizational capacity, as well as positive service delivery processes and outcomes in accredited organizations. As COA continues to strive to develop and strengthen accreditation

standards relevant to the EAP field, it is imperative that stakeholders continue to participate in the process to help ensure a future of quality EAP services for clients that deserve nothing less.

## Standards Development Process



References

*The COA Standards and Self-Study Manual, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Version 1.1.* Council on Accreditation: New York, NY, October 2001.

*The Employee Assistance Program Standards and Self-Study Manual.* Council on Accreditation and the Employee Assistance Society of North America: New York, NY, June 2001.

*The Employee Assistance Program Standards and Self-Study Manual, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.* Council on Accreditation: New York, NY, January 2003.

Employee Assistance Professionals Association. “EAP Core Technology” [Online]. Available: <http://www.eapassn.org/public/pages/index.cfm?pageid=521>.