

# The Accreditation Handbook for Organizations

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## **Background**

The Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) is dedicated to ensuring that persons who are blind and those with low vision are able to reach and exceed individual goals and live more independently. AER works to ensure that professionals who provide services possess the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary to provide high quality services; and organizations that provide services will operate within and above industry standards for quality.

Since its inception, AER has had one primary purpose and that is to elevate the conditions that drive to excellence. Whether it is supporting professionals who deliver services or supporting professionals who provide instruction to emerging professionals, AER recognizes the role standards play in achieving short and long term goals. AER believes that the greatest results will be achieved by a conflated approach. Thereby in 2017, the AER Board of Directors voted to adopt an accreditation program. The program, previously managed by the National Accreditation Council Incorporated is now under the executive management of AER. Building on its experience with the AER University Review Program, AER launched the AER Accreditation System in 2018—combining its efforts under one umbrella.

AER's interest in accreditation is based upon the belief that all organizations that provide services to individuals who are blind and those with low vision have an obligation to ensure, as far as possible, that services provided by its staff are of high professional quality and under the best administrative conditions. One effective way in which this obligation can be met is by establishing appropriate standards and by measuring organizations against those standards. Accreditation is intended to protect the interests of consumers, benefit the public; and improve the quality of service delivery and administrative practices. And, it is for that reason and many others that AER has designed an accreditation system based in quality service delivery and outcomes.

## **Purpose of Accreditation**

Accreditation is a process under which agencies and schools are evaluated against a set of standards, referred to hereafter as organizations. This accreditation has two fundamental purposes: to validate the quality of the organization and its programs and to assist in the improvement of the organization and its programs. As a result, the accreditation process does not prescribe specific practices, but is concerned, from a qualitative standpoint, that the organization and its programs have clearly defined relevant goals and appropriate conditions under which goals can be achieved. Accreditation serves as a vehicle that allows for organizations to first examine itself via a self-study in relation to a specific set of standards and then be assessed by external reviewers.

The self-study is essential to an accreditation process. A self-study is a procedure whereby an organization describes, evaluates, and subsequently improves the quality of its efforts. It is important to note that a self-study differs from a self-assessment. Self-

assessment involves the identification of an organization's strengths and limitations and the delineation of the steps necessary to address those limitations. Self-study requires a commitment to change rather than to maintain the status quo. Through the self-study procedure, an organization conducts a systematic and thorough examination of its components in light of its stated mission. Such an evaluation allows an organization to determine the success it is having in accomplishing its self-established goals and objectives through careful evaluation. To this end, the accreditation program requires a self-study as the first step in the process and an evaluation of supporting materials by external reviewers. Together, it provides a framework for continuous improvement and improved outcomes.

### **AER Accreditation Council**

The AER Accreditation Council has chief responsibility for setting and enforcing standards set forth in the accreditation program. The Council consists of 10 members who are formally appointed by the Council Chair; the AER Executive Director serves as the Council Chair. The Council consists of individuals who have skills and experience with program administration and development, system building, educational and rehabilitation protocols and service delivery. The Council acts as the overseeing body that ensures that the standards are current, relevant, and advance excellence in service delivery and that those organizations seeking accreditation meet the standards.

The primary responsibilities of the Council include:

- Define standards and criteria for evaluation of entities and programs and assure compliance to the standards.
- Develop methods for measuring the effectiveness of standards and the accreditation process.
- Establish guidelines and policies applicable to the accreditation and approval processes.
- Review accreditation application with supporting documentation and recommendations from reviewers.
- Approve or deny the accreditation and revoke as applicable.
- Hear and decide appeal requests related to the denial of full accreditation.
- Establish the re-evaluation of standards cycle and make improvements to the standards as needed.
- Work in collaboration with workgroups and the Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) to advance the mission of the accreditation program.

### **Accreditation Council vs. Review Panel**

Standards are set by the AER Accreditation Council which is led by the Council Chair; and are reviewed periodically to ensure that standards are at all times relevant, intentional and timely. Hence, a review panel is assigned to determine if standards that are deemed indicators of quality performance and measures of sound practices are met. The review panel, led by the Panel Chair is charged with reviewing materials submitted by the organization; and conducting interviews with staff, consumers and stakeholders to determine whether the organization met, partially met or did not meet the standards. The

review panel via the Panel Chair makes a recommendation to the Council and the Council renders a final decision regarding approval or denial of accreditation. The Council differs from the Review Panel in charge, scope and authority as depicted below:



## Standards

Accreditation requires a review of 2 types of standards: (1) Management Services Standards and the (2) Program Standards. The Management Services Standards are administrative in nature and are deemed absolute. Within each set of program standards, there are critical and absolute standards. All absolute standards must be fully met to receive accreditation. Critical standards must be at least partially met to receive accreditation.

The standards are formatted to allow the organization to conduct a meticulous self-study and provide supporting documentation and commentary that clearly indicates compliance, non-compliance or partial compliance to a respective standard. Compliance degrees are scored as:

- The standard is met.
- The standard is partially met.
- The standard is not met.

The self-study should be completed for all standards even if the standard is not met or partially met. When the standard is not met or partially met, additional commentary is required and submitted as an attachment to explicate the score. There are four categories of standards and are grouped I - IV:

- I. **Education and Rehabilitation Management Services Standards**
  - A. Policy and Administration (PA)
  - B. Financial Management (FM)

- C. Staff and Volunteers (SV)
- D. Buildings and Grounds (BG)
- E. Community Relations, Public Education & Fundraising (CRPEF)
- F. Community and Consumer Involvement (CCI)
- G. Program Evaluation and Improvement (PEI)\*

**II. Education and Rehabilitation Program Standards**

- A. Orientation and Mobility Instruction Services (OMIS)
- B. Technology Instruction Services (TIS)
- C. Low Vision Clinic Services (LVCS)
- D. Short Term (STP) and Support Services Programs (SSP)
- E. Itinerant Services Provisions (ISP)
- F. Outreach Services (OS)
- G. Early Childhood Programs (ECP)
- H. Supplemental Learning Curriculum Programs for School Aged Learners (SLCP)

**III. Education Program Standards**

- A. Identification and Referral (IR)
- B. Assessment of Needs for Learners who are blind, for those who have low vision, and those with additional disabilities and deaf-blindness (AN)
- C. Program Design for Learners who are blind, for those who have low vision, and those with additional disabilities and deaf-blindness (PD)
- D. Preschool Programs (PP)
- E. K-12 Programs (K-12P)
- F. Multiple Disabilities Programs (MDP)
- G. Residential, Health Care and Recreation Services (RHRS)

**IV. Rehabilitation Program Standards**

- A. Industries Employment Services (IES)
- B. Vision Rehabilitation Therapy Services (VRTS)
- C. Vocational and Rehabilitation Counseling Services (RCS)
- D. Rehabilitation Recreation Services (RRS)
- E. Rehabilitation Residential and Health Care Service (RRHCS)
- F. Provision of Reading Materials (PRM)
- G. Blindness Prevention Services (BPS)
- H. Community Integration Services (CIS)

*\*When applying for accreditation or re-accreditation for a Program, the organization must submit documentation and meet the Program Evaluation and Improvement standards for the respective program.*

## Accreditation Eligibility Requirements

There are certain baseline criteria that must be met in order to be eligible to apply for accreditation. These objective requirements affirm that the organization is in good standing and that the organization and program(s) meet a threshold that indicates operations and performance for at least one full year. In order for an organization to be eligible to apply for, receive, or maintain accreditation, it must demonstrate that it meets the following eligibility criteria:

1. At the time of application, the organization must be licensed to operate and do business in the state, city and territory where the organization is located. Specifically, the organization must have all necessary authorizations from the jurisdiction in which it operates and be in compliance with all applicable local, state, and federal requirements. *Schools* under investigation or sanction by a local, state, or federal agency will be deemed ineligible to apply for initial accreditation.
2. The organization and program(s) must have been in existence for at least one year and have served at least ten consumers.
3. The organization must have a paid executive leader (i.e. Executive Director, President, etc.).
4. The organization and program(s) must be established, in whole or in part for the purpose of serving individuals who are blind and those with low vision.

## Application Process

Accreditation applications are accepted at any time throughout the year. There is a two-part process: A and B. The accreditation begins with the completion of an application — termed “Letter of Intent,” which is Part A. Submission of an application communicates a commitment to quality programming, intent to submit the required documents within the specific timeframe and an agreement to participate in applicable interviews, subsequent telephone calls and a site visit. The application allows the organization to provide important information related to the accreditation process and identifies each program for which accreditation is being pursued. One “Letter of Intent/Application” can be used if the organization is seeking accreditation for multiple programs. There is a \$500 application fee for a first-time accreditation and a \$350 fee for re-accreditation applications; and travel expenses for up to 2 reviewers are paid by the organization seeking accreditation or re-accreditation. In most cases, only 1 reviewer will be required. Part A, which is the “Letter of Intent/Application,” and payment should be mailed to:

5680 King Centre Drive Suite 600  
Alexandria, Virginia 22315

or sent via email to [accreditation@aerbvi.org](mailto:accreditation@aerbvi.org).

## Part B

Once part A (The Letter of Intent) has been received by AER and processed, the organization will be contacted and provided an agreed upon due date to submit the following:

- A self-study of all management services standards and program standards with required supporting documentation that substantiates that the standard has been met and commentary for each standard not met or partially met.
- Labeled files must be sent electronically via Dropbox using the coding identified via each standard. If necessary, additional files may be submitted to further explain elements of the organization and program(s).

## **Accreditation Process**

By applying for initial or re-accreditation, an organization accepts and agrees to the terms set forth in the Accreditation Application; and accepts and agrees that the responsibility rests with the organization to demonstrate compliance to the standards set forth for accreditation. An organization must supply complete, truthful, and accurate information and documentation showing that the organization complies with all accrediting standards.

All submitted items must be organized and prepared in accordance with specific instructions and the coding system; and submitted electronically via Dropbox. Items submitted for consideration must be submitted within the required timeframe and be certified as true and correct by the highest ranking official at the organization. Note: an organization may withdraw an application it has submitted before it has been considered. The withdrawal request must be in writing and sent by a traceable means to AER. Fees associated with the withdrawn application will not be refunded.

A panel review team will be selected. A meeting is held via conference call with the team and the accreditation manager to start the process. During the call, a panel chair will be selected and a person is named to be the onsite reviewer(s). The management services standards are reviewed by each panel member. The panel chair assigns program standards to members of the panel review team. The panel members examine all information and items submitted by the organization via the self-study against the assigned standards to determine actual compliance. Organizations are evaluated according to compliance with management services and program standards using a mix-method approach that includes a virtual and onsite inspection. Standards are classed uniform and observation. Uniform Standards are measured virtually; and Observation Standards are evaluated during the onsite review.

Each reviewer completes the last columns of an individual copy of the Standards Self-Study form, scoring each standard as either fully met, partially met, or not met. The information and supporting documents should provide sufficient information for the reviewers to score each standard. The review panel notes if there is insufficient information to determine whether a particular standard is met; questions about those standards are addressed during a subsequent stage in the process.

After the self-study documents have been fully evaluated by each reviewer and each uniform standard has been scored electronically by each reviewer, a second conference call meeting is scheduled for the panel and accreditation manager.

Note: the AER central office compiles the individual reviewer reports into one consolidated report. The review panel then meets via conference call to discuss their findings. If there is disagreement about scores, the review team looks at the information provided again and determines if consensus can be reached. The respective standard is discussed and evaluated by all panel members. If there is a split decision between the panel members, the standard, documentation, and discussion notes are submitted to the Chair of the Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission (OSAC\*) to evaluate and render a decision.

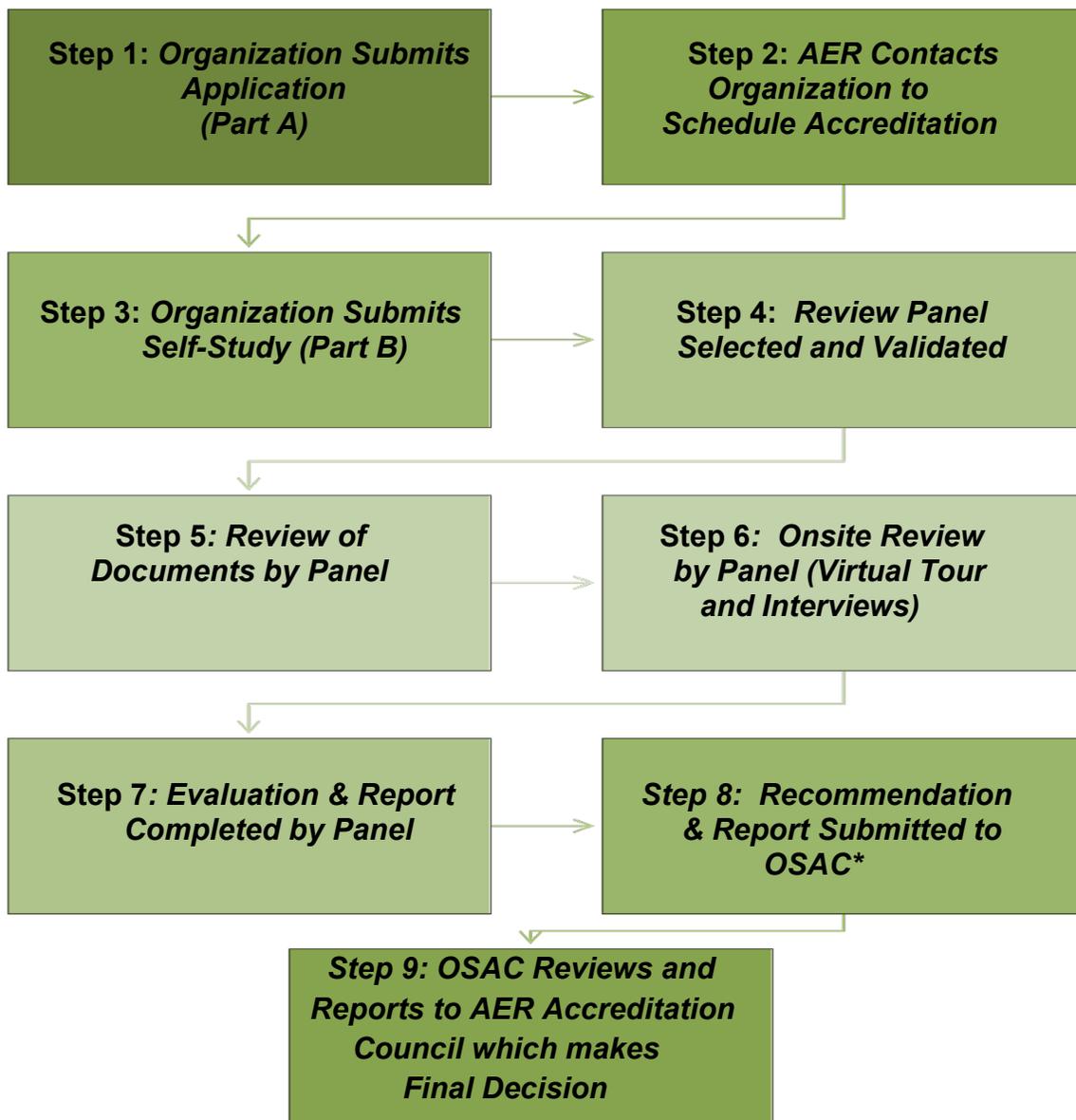
The next phase involves completion of the onsite review. The onsite includes a review of the observation standards and interviews with staff, consumers and stakeholders. This process is conducted virtually.

A third meeting is then held with the panel and accreditation manager. When the review panel has completed voting on each of the standards and deliberations are complete, the panel makes a recommendation for the appropriate accreditation status: Full Accreditation, Provisional Accreditation or Accreditation Denial. A report is sent to OSAC (Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission) which then reviews and submits a recommendation to the AER Accreditation Council. The Council makes the final decision.

For full accreditation, the absolute criteria must all be met for each section of the management and services standards, at least 95% of the critical standards must be fully met and the remaining standards partially met.

Provisional accreditation can be granted if one of the absolute program standards is not met and if 85% to 94% of the other program standards are met. Provisional accreditation will only be granted when a program commits to meeting all absolute standards and achieving 95% of other critical program standards within one year and the other standards are at least partially met. Provisionally approved organizations and programs that have demonstrated that they meet the conditions stipulated by the Council within one year from the date of notification will be granted full accreditation status.

Accreditation Denial is issued when the organization and program did not meet minimum standards in a large number of criteria and this situation cannot be remedied in the short term. The following diagram illustrates the accreditation process:



*\*OSAC: Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission was established by AER Accreditation Council March 4, 2021 to be a parallel in basic functions to the Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) which reviews panel recommendations and standards for personnel preparation programs.*

### **Panel Reviewers**

The accreditation program is made possible by a volunteer-based review process and system. The success of the program depends on having experienced and skilled individuals to carry out the task of evaluating an applicant's compliance to identified standards. These individuals, known as Panel Reviewers, provide each organization with an objective, professional and quality review of their services and operations.

## **Reviewer Requirements**

The accreditation program seeks individuals with strong core competencies to review organizations that provide services for individuals who are blind or with low vision. Reviewers will be responsible for evaluating service delivery systems and operations against a set of accreditation standards. Reviewers will meet the following desired requirements:

- Three or more years of related field and/or administrative experience.
- No conflict of interest with the organization subject to review.
- Completion of the reviewer training and exam with a “passing” score.
- Excellent oral and written communication skills.

## **Review Teams**

Review teams consist of 2-4 individuals. The size of the team depends on the size and operation of the organization. Each panel review team has a team leader—referred to as the Panel Chair. Among other duties, the Panel Chair is responsible for submitting the final written report and accreditation recommendation to the Council Chair within 30 days of completing the full review.

## **Reviewer Training & Onboarding**

The Council is committed to ensuring that each reviewer has the skills needed to successfully complete an accreditation review. Each reviewer is required to:

- Complete the 1 hour facilitated training (virtual or a face-to-face training held at an AER Conference).
- Complete a pass/fail based-exam with a score of 80 or higher.
- Review accreditation handbook and sign verification of completion form.
- Complete the Accreditation Reviewer Information Form.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the Accreditation Council?**

The Council is the governing body responsible for the standards and has final authority to award, deny or revoke accreditation. It awards accreditation to organizations and programs that demonstrate evidence of high quality by meeting management services and program standards.

### **What is the Accreditation Process?**

It is an in-depth review of an organization and its programs that seeks to drive successful outcomes and continuous improvement.

### **Is accreditation important?**

The accreditation seal communicates an organization’s commitment to quality and provides an opportunity to raise the visibility of the organization and program.

Accreditation encourages intentional, insightful, and responsive program design and organizational management. It facilitates an alignment between the organization and the programs' missions and goals.

### **How long does it take to complete the accreditation process?**

There is a 3 step process that includes submitting a Letter of Intent, completing the self-study and the panel review process. The entire process can take up to 6 months depending on the schedule agreed upon by the applicant and the AER Accreditation Council, and completeness of all application components.

### **How do I obtain an application for accreditation?**

Applications and related information can be obtained by sending an email to [accreditation@aerbvi.org](mailto:accreditation@aerbvi.org) or downloading it from <https://aerbvi.org/the-national-accreditation-council/organizations/>.

### **How can I become a reviewer?**

All materials for becoming a reviewer can be found on our website: <https://aerbvi.org/the-national-accreditation-council/become-a-reviewer/>

All reviewers are required to complete the accreditation reviewer training and pass the exam.

### **What is the period for Accreditation?**

An accreditation is valid for 5 years and requires that the organization submit an annual update report and accreditation fee.

### **Can an organization's accreditation be revoked?**

Yes, the accreditation can be revoked at the discretion of the Council if the organization does not submit an annual update report, meet requirements and or fails to demonstrate adherence to the standards.

### **Is there an application fee to seek accreditation?**

There is a \$500 application fee for a first time accreditation and a \$350 fee for re-accreditation applications. Travel expenses for each onsite reviewer are paid by the organization seeking accreditation or re-accreditation.

### **What do I do if my accreditation is denied?**

A decision can be appealed by following the procedure in the AER Accreditation Council Policies and Procedures Manual. A link to this document is on the home page of the Accreditation Program (<https://aerbvi.org/the-national-accreditation-council>). The appeal must be received in writing within 30 days of the date of the accreditation letter announcing the decision to deny. The appeal letter should be sent via email to [accreditation@aerbvi.org](mailto:accreditation@aerbvi.org). The Accreditation Council will review, investigate and respond with next steps and actions.

### Contact Information

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call (571) 982-4018 or send an email to [accreditation@aerbvi.org](mailto:accreditation@aerbvi.org).

### Part A: Letter of Intent Template

See: Accreditation Program Application at <https://aerbvi.org/the-national-accreditation-council/organizations/>

## ACCREDITATION FEEDBACK FORM

(Please contact [accreditation@aerbvi.org](mailto:accreditation@aerbvi.org) for an electronic copy.)

Organization:

Address:

Accreditation Review Year:

Evaluate Your Experience	Scale				
	P o o r	Good			E x c e l l e n t
1. Application Submission Process	1	2	3	4	5
2. Clarity of Standards	1	2	3	4	5
3. Overall Process	1	2	3	4	5
4. Onsite Review	1	2	3	4	5
5. Overall Experience	1	2	3	4	5

Please share any additional feedback including strengths and limitations that can help ensure that the accreditation process is a satisfactory experience and that this accreditation program meets your needs:

