Organizations and Schools Accreditation Handbook

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## Background

As professionals we are dedicated to ensuring that the services being provided to individuals who are blind and those who have low vision are of the highest quality. The providers of these services must apply specialized knowledge and skills to benefit those receiving such services.

In addition, consumers who are blind or low vision, leadership of organizations and schools, and professional and support staff must have access to information regarding:

1. The performance of AER Accreditation Program in the U.S. in terms of fairness, transparency, support for innovation and improvement, communication on standards and acceptable documentation, quality of reviewers and reviews, timeliness and responsiveness, and promotion of quality services.
2. The performance of AER Accreditation Program in Canada and other international entities in terms of fairness, transparency, support for innovation and improvement, communication on standards and acceptable documentation, quality of reviewers and reviews, timeliness, and responsiveness, and promotion of quality services.
3. Accreditation status of Organizations and Schools for the Blind and Low Vision.

To meet the needs of both professionals and consumers, the Association of Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) Accreditation Program is designed to ensure that the “AER Accredited” distinction is awarded to services offered directly to people who are blind or have low vision are provided by organizations and schools who have demonstrated through performance, systems, processes, ~~faculty~~ and procedures that they offer excellent learning experiences, that lead to success in school and work, and full integration in family life and community participation.

## Purpose of Accreditation

**AER Accreditation Program Mission:** to advance excellence in the field of blindness and low vision services by ensuring that:

* organizations and specialized schools that provide direct services to individuals who have a visual impairment deliver high quality direct services, and
* institutions of higher education prepare professionals to provide services of the highest quality to individuals who have a visual impairment.

**OSAC Mission:**  AER’s Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission (OSAC) employs a forward thinking and outcomes-based approach, supporting entities’ continuous improvement efforts through analysis of current practices, to ensure services of the highest quality to individuals who are blind or have low vision.

**OSAC Vision**:  The interests of consumers and the public will be served by high quality direct specialized services provided by organizations and schools to people who are blind or have low vision.

Accreditation is used to describe both a status and a process.

As a status, it denotes a third-party’s validation of an organization’s conformity with specific standards as set forth by an accrediting authority. The scope of an accreditation is determined by the specific services being assessed, in the context of the organization’s mission and the needs of the locale where it is located.

As a process, accreditation symbolizes an organization’s sustained commitment to self-monitoring and continuous quality improvement. The process begins when an organization or higher education program applies, pays the fee, and undertakes an internal self-study to assess its conformity with specific standards and other normative attributes that are described for accreditation. This self-study consists of a thorough and systematic process that documents the organization’s conformity to recognized standards for service infrastructure, administration, and performance.  The process continues with independent verification by reviewers using a systematic, documented approach to evaluate the organization’s self-reported conformity to the specific standards, outcomes data and other normative attributes that are described for accreditation.

The overarching goal of this process is to provide the valuable experience of self-review to the organization or school, and to support the pursuit of best practices and innovative responses to the needs of individuals who are blind or visually impaired in a constantly changing world.

The AER Annual Report is a requirement for maintaining accreditation status through the entire term. Achieving accreditation demonstrates that an organization has met relevant standards and confers on the organization the obligation to document its self-monitoring and continuous quality improvement.  The Annual Report provides evidence that an organization that serves individuals who are blind and those with low vision is maintaining a clearly articulated purpose and ensuring a setting that is accessible, functional, and safe for consumers, students, visitors, staff, and volunteers.

Continuous learning, improvement and striving for best practices is a goal of the very best organizations. Accreditation enables the organization to demonstrate to their constituents and to the general public that their programs have met the stringent standards set by the accrediting authority.

## AER Accreditation Council (AERAC)(The 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 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, systems, 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 entities 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 for reviewers.
* Move to either approve or deny the accreditation request.
* Hear and decide appeals 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) and the Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission (OSAC)
* to advance the mission of the accreditation program.

Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission (OSAC)

Established by the Council, the Organizations and Schools Accreditation Commission (OSAC) has chief responsibility for creating and revising program standards, establishing policies and procedures, and submitting them to the Council for approval. In addition, the OSAC approves each review panel that is selected to conduct a program review; and the Commission examines and ratifies the review report and accreditation recommendation submitted by the panel. The OSAC completes a written Accreditation Decision report and submits to the Chair of the AER Accreditation Council (Council) for final consideration and vote. The accreditation manager communicates the final decision to the institution.

The accreditation process entails a self-study by the organization or school to determine if standards that are deemed indicators of quality performance and measures of sound practices are met. This self-study is submitted to AER for evaluation by an external team (i.e. Review Panel). Upon confirmation that the standards are met sufficiently, accreditation is awarded by AERAC.

## Application Process

To be eligible to apply for accreditation, the organization or school must be in good standing and provide a minimum of one program for at least a 1-year period of time.

Applications are accepted at any time throughout the year. The application includes an Organizations and Schools Application Form (see <https://www.aerbvi.org/organizations-agencies-and-schools-for-the-blind-> ) and payment of the application fee. Organizations initiate the review process by paying the application fee when the AER accreditation application form is submitted. During the five-year term of the accreditation, the organization/specialized school is required to pay annual dues to maintain accreditation. These dues help to defray the actual cost of maintaining the accreditation program without burdening organizations with a higher total cost up-front in one lump sum.

The Application Form, and payment should be sent via email to accreditation@aerbvi.org. If paying by credit card, please call 703-671-5875 to make arrangements.

Once the Application Form and payment have been received by AER and processed, the AER Accreditation Manager will contact the organization/school to reach mutual agreement on the target date to submit its self-study forms for each Standard (see <https://www.aerbvi.org/organizations-agencies-and-schools-for-the-blind-> :

* All the Management Standards self-study forms and
* The Program Standards self-study forms that the organization/school chooses based on relevance to its services and determination of need for accreditation in a given area.

On both sets of standards the institution will have inserted links to all files and supporting documents. These links will be shown in the column entitled “Documents Submitted.” The actual linked files do not need to be sent to AER. Only the Management Standards Self-Study forms and the Program Standards Self-Study forms need to be emailed to accreditation@aerbvi.org. Each form will show both the links and the ratings decided by the organization/school’s self-study committee.

## Self-Study Process

Self-study is the process undertaken internally by an organization or school to assess its conformity with specific standards and other normative attributes that are described for accreditation.  Independent verification by peer reviewers uses a systematic, documented process to evaluate the institution’s conformity to the specific standards and other normative attributes that are described for accreditation.

The institution uses the self-study forms provided by AER for both Management and Program Standards.

* Management Standards are administrative in nature and are designated Absolute Standards. All Absolute Standards (100%) must be fully met.
* Program Standards pertain to the specific services the organization or school wishes to have accredited. These standards are either Absolute Standards (indicated by an \*) or Critical Standards; at least 95% of critical standards must be fully met for full accreditation.  No standards can be unmet.

Full accreditation requires that 100% of Absolute Standards be fully met and 95% of Critical Standards.

Provisional accreditation is conferred if between 85% and 94% of critical standards are met or 1 management standard is not met; an institution that is provisionally accredited has one year to correct the flaws.

Self-assessment is optimally effective when it is conducted by leadership (Board and management staff), professional and support staff, consumers and other stakeholders who are knowledgeable about the organization or school and its services as they pertain to the standards under consideration. For transparency purposes, all members of the Self-Assessment Committee who participated in the preparation of each section are identified in the summary table provided at the end of the guide.

The following rating scale is embodied to evaluate the extent to which the program meets each of the standards:

* The standard is met.
* The standard is partially met.
* The standard is not met.

In the space provided for Committee Decision, the institution indicates by a check mark in the Met, Partially Met or Not Met columns its assessment of its perceived compliance with each standard. In the Supporting Documentation column, the institution provides links to the documents or specific sections of larger documents that provide evidence that the standards are being met.

When the organization or school’s own self-assessment committee deems that a standard is not met or partially met (or not applicable), additional commentary is required on a separate document labelled as a comment on a given standard to explain the response. A link to this comment should be inserted into the Supporting Documentation column. Whenever any non-compliance is recognized for a relevant standards section, the institution must acknowledge this and propose an actionable remedial response (a proposed plan of action with a timeline not to exceed one year).

Upon receipt of the institution’s complete packet—its self-study with links to all supporting documents—the AER Accreditation program manager will form a review panel of 2 members, in coordination with the institution to ensure no panel member has a conflict of interest.

The institution will institute a process whereby stakeholders and consumers are invited to submit feedback relative to the institution’s accreditation review. Accepted methodologies (other approaches must be approved by OSAC in advance):

* a broad-based community forum which is recorded. Options for remote participation must be provided.
* an accessible zoom and telephone-based forum which is recorded.
* Minutes of at least three consumer advisory body meetings where accreditation is discussed and input is provided on various standards. The consumer advisory body must be an established part of the organization’s feedback process with regularly established meetings, and attended by a manager or executive of the organization.

Whatever methodology is used, OSAC is to be provided the Invitation list, the number of attendees and any organizations represented, and the Method of distribution of invitations.

The recording is to be submitted to accreditation@aerbvi.org within 30 days of the submission of the complete accreditation packet.

The review panel is composed of independent content experts with recognized knowledge and experience in the field of blind and low vision rehabilitation. The panel will meet in Zoom conferences to review the self-assessment and the various documents that make up the body of evidence. Once this electronic review has been completed, the review panel will hold Zoom or telephone conference calls with members of the Board, management team, professional staff, consumers and collateral agencies of the institution in review to gather information on specifics and/or verify certain compliance with certain standards. Upon completion of these conferences, the review panel will meet to confirm they have resolved the unanswered or ambiguous questions. In addition, the review panel will conduct a zoom-based tour of the organization or school’s facility, primarily as it relates to the buildings and grounds standards, but also for an overview of the educational/training (and residential) locations.

Finally, the review panel completes a recommendation form. The AER accreditation manager submits it along with the aggregate reviews of all self-study forms to the Chair of OSAC within 5 working days of the last review panel meeting. OSAC reviews the materials at its next scheduled monthly meeting, prepares its own recommendation and forwards this package to AERAC for a final decision at its next scheduled meeting (usually later in the same month as the OSAC meeting). The AER accreditation manager will communicate the decision to the institution.

If the institution disagrees with the decision, the appeals process is explained in the AERAC Policies and Procedures Manual: <https://aerbvi.org/-accreditation>.

Additional information on the review process follows the graphic presentation of the process described in the text.

## Review Process

Review teams study the materials submitted for both the Management and Program sections.

The review panel prepares a consensus score for each standard as either fully met, partially met, or not met/insufficient information, based on each reviewer’s individual input on a copy of the Standards Self-Study forms. The review panel notes if there is insufficient information to determine that standards are met so that questions about standards can be addressed in the upcoming teleconference interviews.

After gathering as much information as possible from the submitted application, the reviewers schedule a zoom-based tour and zoom or teleconference calls with management, Board members, staff, consumers and collateral agencies. The purpose of the zoom-based/teleconferences are three-fold: (1) the teleconferences confirm that the information represented in the application packet is accurate and reflects the true state of the program; (2) some standards may not be fully documented in the supporting documents and must be partially evaluated through interviews. For example, whether or not program accessibility meets the students’ needs should be reflected in the application and confirmed by interviews and virtual zoom tour; and (3) on occasion, a team may have questions about a few standards that can best be answered through interviews. However, if the team feels that the application did not provide enough information, the team is NOT expected to use the interview to gather information that should have been submitted in the application. In that case, following the conference call, the organization or school is asked to supply the missing information in written form.

After the application documents have been fully evaluated and the virtual tour and interviews completed, and all remaining documentation is received and shared with the team members, the review team ~~then~~ meets via zoom/teleconference call to discuss their findings. If there is disagreement about any scores and no consensus can be reached, the chair of the OSAC is called in to cast the deciding vote. Likewise, if the review team cannot come to agreement on whether or not to recommend approval, the Chair of OSAC will make the determination. When the review panel has completed voting on each of the standards, the panel members prepare a report with a recommendation for the appropriate accreditation status. The report will be presented to AERAC at its next meeting for a final determination.

* Full accreditation—usually conferred for 5 years
* Provisional Accreditation—conferred for one year whereupon the organization or school submits a report showing the deficits have been cured. AERAC reviews it to make a final determination.
* Accreditation Denial—an appeals process is clearly defined in the AERAC Policies Manual: <https://www.aerbvi.org/accreditation>

For full accreditation, the absolute standards must be met for 100% of the Management standards and any Program Standards designated by an asterisk (\*) which indicates these also are absolute standards. Also for full accreditation at least 95% of the Program critical standards must be fully met and the remaining standards partially met.

Provisional accreditation can be granted if one of the absolute Management standards is not met and/or if 85% to 94% of the critical Program standards are met. Provisional accreditation will only be granted when a program commits to meeting all absolute Management and Program standards and achieving fully met scores of 95% of critical Program standards within one year. Provisionally approved programs that have demonstrated that they meet the conditions stipulated by the OSAC within one year from the date of review will be granted full approval status; if the provisional approval is not satisfied in that one-year time frame, the accreditation status will be reclassified as denied.

Accreditation Denial is issued when the organization or school did not meet minimum standards in a large number of criteria and this situation cannot be remedied in the short term.

## Panel Reviewers

The AER Accreditation Program is made possible by a volunteer-based review process system. The success of the program depends on having experienced and skilled professionals to carry out the task of evaluating an applicant’s compliance to identified standards. These professionals, known as Reviewers, provide each organization with an objective, professional and quality review of their services and operations. Review teams consist of 2 individuals.

## Reviewer Requirements

AER seeks individuals with strong core competencies to review agencies, schools and higher education institutions. Reviewers will be responsible for evaluating service delivery systems and operations against a set of accreditation standards. Reviewers shall meet the following requirements:

* Three or more years of recent (i.e., within the last 5 years) related field and/or administrative experience or at least 10 years of prior related experiences.
* No conflict of interest with the organization or higher education institution seeking accreditation.
* Completion of the reviewer training and exam with a “passing” score of 80 or better.
* Excellent oral and written communication skills.

## 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:

* Review the OSAC and/or HEAC accreditation handbook, and the AERAC Policy and Procedures manual. HEAC reviewer candidates also study Instructional Modules I, II and III.
* Complete a pass/fail based-exam with a score of 80 or higher.
* Complete the Accreditation Reviewer Information Form.

## Communication of Accreditation Status/Annual Reports

Achieving accreditation demonstrates that an organization has met relevant standards and confers on the organization the obligation to document its self-monitoring and continuous quality improvement by submitting the AER Annual Report at the end of each calendar year.  A sample of the report is located here: <https://www.aerbvi.org/organizations-agencies-and-schools-for-the-blind->

This report is a requirement for maintaining accreditation status through the entire term approved by AERAC. Accreditation can be reclassified as provisional for failure to provide the report.

## Planning for Reaccreditation

Programs granted Full Accreditation should plan to submit their application for reaccreditation in lieu of their 4th Annual Program Report which AERAC normally requests at the end of a calendar year, or at least 9 months before the expiration date of their accreditation term to allow sufficient time for collecting documentation and completing the self-studies. This preparation takes nine to twelve months in most cases.

AERAC will send a reminder at mid-year points. In extenuating circumstances, programs may request a six-month extension via email to accreditation@aerbvi.org.

Requests for an extension MUST:

* be made before the expiration date. If request is made after the expiration date, the accreditation will be expired and program will be removed from AER website.
* accompany submission of an application for reaccreditation and the requisite fee, in order to “freeze” the accreditation status and maintain listing on the AER website.

If an extension is granted, the term of the reaccreditation, if granted, will remain at the five year anniversary the program would have received without an extension.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**What is the AER Accreditation Council?**

The Council is the governing body responsible for the standards and has final authority to award or deny accreditation. It awards accreditation to degree programs that demonstrate evidence of high quality by meeting administrative and professional preparation standards.

**What is the Organizations and Schools program accreditation?**

It is an in-depth review of an organization or school that provides direct services to people who are blind or have low vision. The review affirms the quality of management and programs offered.

**Is accreditation important?**

The Accreditation of an organization or school communicates an institution’s commitment to quality and provides an opportunity to raise the visibility of the program. Accreditation encourages intentional, insightful, and innovative program design and facilitates an alignment between the institution and the programs’ missions and goals.

**How long is the accreditation process?**

The accreditation process includes submitting an Application Form/fee, a self-study, and a review by a 2-member panel, OSAC and AERAC. The entire process can take up to three months following the receipt of all components of the application and self-study.

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

Applications and related information can be obtained on the website: <https://www.aerbvi.org/organizations-agencies-and-schools-for-the-blind->

or by sending an email to accreditation@aerbvi.org.

**How can I become a reviewer?**

All information for becoming a reviewer is available on the website: <https://www.aerbvi.org/become-a-reviewer> or you can send an email to accreditation@aerbvi.org for more information.

**What is the period of Accreditation for an Organization or School?**

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

**Can an institution’s accreditation be revoked?**

Yes, the accreditation can be revoked at the discretion of the Council if the institution does not submit an annual update report and/or fails to demonstrate a continuous adherence to the standards.

I**s there an application fee to seek accreditation?**

There is a fee of $500 for an initial accreditation review or $350 for a re-accreditation review. In addition, annual dues are calculated at 0.001 X total expenses on organization’s 990. These dues are integral to the cost of maintaining the accreditation program and continued accreditation is based on submission of the annual dues by all accredited organizations.

**Contact Information:**

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call (703-671-4500) or send an email to accreditation@aerbvi.org.