



The American Correctional Association (ACA) and the Accreditation of Prisons

Within the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs' larger corrections capacity building program is our effort to help the Government of Mexico to earn internationally accepted American Correctional Association (ACA) accreditation for their prison facilities, and then to encourage them to exceed ACA's minimum standards.

What is the ACA and what is the accreditation process for prison facilities? The ACA is a non-profit professional organization with the goal of improving the U.S. justice system. In April 2011 at the request of the Government of Mexico national auditors and ACA executive staff visited Mexican prisons to assess the feasibility of accrediting under new international standards which were being developed. The first four Mexican federal facilities received audits under the international standards during Nov-Dec 2011, and were accredited in Jan 2012. Up to date, 8 federal facilities, the National Penitentiary Academy and one state facility located in Chihuahua are accredited.

The ACA was founded in 1870 by correctional professionals who developed guiding principles for humane treatment of inmates. In the 1970's, ACA developed an accreditation process that applied standards which could measure compliance to these core principles. To receive initial accreditation, a prison must meet 100 percent of mandatory standards, and a minimum of 90 percent of non-mandatory standards. These standards are minimum acceptable practices, however all facilities are encouraged to exceed the minimum standards. For each non-mandatory standard with which a facility is found to be in non-compliance, the facility is required to present a written plan of action for bringing the standard into compliance. ACA has 138 International Core Standards, of which 39 are mandatory. These 138 standards are divided into seven main areas, each with goals and measurable outcomes: 1) **Safety** - Provide a safe environment; 2) **Security** - Protect from harm; 3) **Order** - Maintain an orderly environment; 4) **Care** - Provide for basic needs and personal care; 5) **Program and Activities** - Help inmates to successfully return to the community; 6) **Justice** - Treat inmates fairly and respect their legal rights. 7) **Administration and Management** - Administer and manage the facilities in a professional and responsible manner. A prison's Initial accreditation is good for three years. Each year the accredited facility must submit an annual report to ACA, which includes any significant incidents, changes, and an internal audit of compliance with the standards. For re-accreditation, the minimum compliance for non-mandatory standards is raised to 95%, and the facility must provide documentary evidence of compliance to the standards for the three year period of accreditation.

During its 143 years of existence, the ACA has been a driving force for the improvement of prison systems through growing worldwide acceptance of its core principles and universally applicable correctional practices that adhere to these principles. One of ACA's core principles is justice: "Corrections must demonstrate integrity, respect, dignity, fairness and pursue a balanced program of humaneness, restoration, rehabilitation and the most appropriate sanctions consistent with public safety."



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What does accreditation mean? Accreditation means that a facility meets the minimum industry acceptable standards in practice and policies. It is the start of a long journey toward best practices, not the end of that journey. When a facility meets accreditation standards, this does not indicate that the facility no longer needs improvement. Nor does accreditation provide approval of any particular practice or policy, but rather it encourages improvement of all practices and policies through the process of making facilities safer and more humane. It is the responsibility of the accredited facility to continue demonstrating its compliance with the standards, values and goals of ACA if it wishes to remain accredited. Over time, the accreditation of corrections facilities in the United States and many other countries has facilitated the sharing of best practices and more advanced industry standards, leading to improved treatment of inmates as well as better public security.