
PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

Telework Programs

Indiana

Summary

The Division of Long-Term Care at the Indiana State Department of Health provides survey and certification services to Indiana's 585 long-term care facilities and 550 Intermediate Care Facilities for the Mentally Retarded (ICF/MR) with one central office by utilizing a home-based office approach for its 100 long-term care surveyors, and 16 ICF/MR surveyors.

Introduction

This report briefly describes the structure and functioning of Indiana's home-based work program for long-term care surveyor staff, its impact, and lessons learned that might benefit other agencies considering telework programs. The information presented is based on interviews with agency management staff.

Background

The Division of Long-Term Care implemented teleworking for all long-term care surveyors over 15 years ago, at the inception of the current federal long-term care survey program. The decision to institute telework as a condition of surveyor employment was based on projected logistical and cost-saving benefits of surveyors traveling directly from their home base to facilities located throughout the state, rather than requiring travel to and from the single agency office in Indianapolis. The expected costs associated with providing equipment and support to teleworking staff were favorable compared to the costs of establishing multiple regional offices.

Intervention

All long-term care surveyors employed by the Indiana agency work from a home-based office. Surveyors must have a working telephone and valid driver's license. During the four- to six-month training period prior to taking the Surveyor Minimum Qualifications Test, new surveyors divide their time between training

activities at the central office and on-the-job training at facilities with "seasoned" surveyors.

The agency provides surveyors with laptop computers, printers, and fax machines, and reimburses for mileage from home to facilities and to the central office in Indianapolis. The state is divided into six long-term care regions, with a supervisor overseeing activity in each region. Each year, surveyors are required to travel to the central office in Indianapolis for three three-day training meetings and also participate in four regional training meetings. Although supervisors are supplied with cell phones and dedicated phone lines, the majority of surveyors utilize their own home telephone lines, accessing the state system with a toll-free number. Communication among surveyors and supervisors, when not at a facility, is accomplished via e-mail, telephone, and pagers. Surveyors are required to access e-mail at least three times per week.

Supervision of surveyors is accomplished primarily through supervisor observation, sometimes unannounced, during facility surveys. Surveyors use an automated system to document activities accomplished during each 37.5 hour workweek and are responsible for notifying supervisors of planned work schedules.

Surveyors use ASPEN Survey Explorer (ASE) and submit reports to a Quality Review contact at the Indianapolis office through a secure network, with finalized ASE information imported by office staff into ASPEN Central Office. Handwritten documentation is mailed to the

Indianapolis office for permanent storage, with no copies remaining in the surveyor's home. Office-based IT staff provide computer and software training to new surveyors and assist with computer problems on an ongoing basis through an IT Help Desk accessible by phone and e-mail; problems that cannot be resolved require surveyors to transport laptops to the office. To allow for routine maintenance checks and software updates by the six IT staff, all surveyors are required to bring their laptops to the tri-annual central office meetings.

Implementation

The telework program has been in place for over 15 years. New surveyors are hired with the understanding that teleworking is a condition of employment. The new surveyor training and orientation program addresses the operational aspects of teleworking, including computer skills, software needs, and communication methods.

Impact

Because the telework program was instituted in Indiana at the outset of the state contract to conduct federal long-term care surveys, it is not possible to assess the impact of teleworking compared to a previously utilized office-based approach. However, agency management report that communication, teamwork, and productivity do not appear to be negatively affected by the home-based system. The approach has been effective in accomplishing the agency's workload with a single office location.

In addition, the telework aspect of the surveyor position has facilitated statewide recruitment,

opening the search to rural areas where the salary may be relatively attractive rather than restricting the candidate pool to the intensely competitive metropolitan areas. The lessened travel burden and increased flexibility for surveyors are speculated to positively affect retention of staff.

Lessons Learned

Agency staff highlight the importance of strong organizational computer capabilities and the availability of IT support to ensure timely, and when necessary, confidential, information flow between surveyors and the agency's central office. If resources permit, it would be useful to provide all surveyors with a dedicated phone line as well as cell phones for safety and communication purposes.

Because their homes are designated as the base of operations, surveyor travel time is considered paid work time. This requirement results in fewer hours of work not dedicated to travel as well as inequity between teleworking surveyors and IT and other office-based staff for whom the paid workday begins upon arrival at the office. If state requirements allowed, agency management would establish that mileage reimbursement and workday payment begin 30 minutes after home-based surveyors leave their home.

Contact Information

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This document is part of an issue brief on teleworking practices in state survey agencies. The issue brief is one of a series by the Division of Health Care Policy and Research, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in state survey agencies. The entire series is available online at CMS' Website, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/SurvCertPromPractProj>. The issue briefs are intended to share information about practices used in state survey agencies and are not an endorsement of any practice.