
PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

Telework Programs

Mississippi

Summary

With the goal of strengthening retention and recruitment, the Division of Health Facilities Licensure & Certification at the Mississippi State Department of Health established an optional telework program in 2003 available to all long-term care surveyors meeting eligibility requirements.

Introduction

This report describes the structure and functioning of Mississippi's telework program, 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

Prior to establishing the telework program, surveyors were required to commute daily to the central office in Jackson when not on a facility visit, regardless of commute distance. This requirement was a hardship for surveyors with a lengthy commute, and was reported to be a key factor in the resignation of several surveyors. The telework program was initiated to reduce travel and increase job satisfaction, with the goal of improving staff retention and recruitment.

Intervention

Twenty-two of 25 long-term care surveyors currently participate in the optional telework program. Eligibility requirements include supervisor recommendation and successful completion of the Surveyor Minimum Qualifications Test and other required training. Supervisors may not be home-based. Teleworkers must sign an agreement that documents agency expectations and states that the agency may revoke telework status at any time.

The agency provides teleworkers with laptop computers and cell phones, and reimburses for personal fax and printer cartridges. Surveyors

utilize their own home telephone lines and use a toll-free number to access the agency system.

Teleworking staff are required to attend monthly team meetings at the Jackson office to complete off-site preparation, record review, and scheduling activities. On alternate months, staff spend an additional day at the central office for training or staff meetings. The agency also requires surveyors to complete documentation for immediate jeopardy at the central office to allow for in-person communication among team members and supervisory guidance.

Surveyors work 40-hour flex time weeks. Supervision is conducted via phone and e-mail communication as well as natural monitoring mechanisms such as timely completion of survey reports.

Surveyors receive basic computer training when issued their laptops, including instruction on using the e-mail program, and can access telephone IT support on an ongoing basis. Computer maintenance checks are conducted when surveyors assemble at the central office for monthly meetings. The agency currently is testing use of ASPEN Survey Explorer.

Implementation

The agency conducted a three-month pilot telework program involving four surveyors in Summer 2003, followed by expansion of the program to include all interested and eligible long-term care surveyors.

Impact

Although formal analyses evaluating the impact of telework on staff retention and recruitment have not been conducted, the introduction of the telework program made an immediate difference in retention, influencing the decision of several formerly employed surveyors to return to the agency. Feedback from teleworking surveyors has been extremely positive, indicating that working from a home-based office helps balance the heavy surveyor travel schedule. The telework program has expanded the recruitment pool beyond the Jackson metropolitan area and has been noted as a factor that brought candidates to apply for surveyor positions.

The telework program has eliminated surveyors' often substantial commute to the Jackson central office previously required on non-facility workdays. Cost analyses conducted by the agency found that travel costs have not decreased, due primarily to the addition of reimbursement for travel from home offices to the central office when required as well as to surveyed facilities. The agency has retained the same amount of office space to accommodate the presence of all staff during monthly meetings and training sessions.

Lessons Learned

Agency management staff advise agencies to be prepared for varying levels of computer capability among surveyor staff, which can affect effective use of e-mail and software programs for teleworkers despite the provision of IT training and technical support. Attention to computer skills and capacity for learning during recruitment efforts may be useful. Surveyors should be required to check e-mail frequently, as e-mail communication is critical in the teleworking context.

To facilitate access to more intensive in-person communication, it is useful to match newer surveyors with an experienced surveyor residing in the same geographic area.

Contact Information

For more information about the telework program at the Mississippi Division of Health Facilities Licensure & Certification, please contact Marilynn Winborne, Acting Director, at 601/576-7326 or marilynn.winborne@msdh.state.ms.us.

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.