
PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

Team-Based Scheduling Practices

Alabama

Summary

The Bureau of Health Provider Standards at the Alabama Department of Public Health initiated a team-based approach to scheduling long-term care facility surveys in Spring 2004, following the establishment of permanent surveyor teams. The surveyor teams independently develop monthly schedules, with subsequent supervisor review and approval. The team-based scheduling practice was initiated as part of an effort to change the agency culture by providing employees with greater decision-making responsibility and autonomy.

Introduction

This report describes the structure and functioning of Alabama's team-based scheduling practice for long-term care surveyor staff, its impact, and lessons learned that might benefit other agencies considering implementing a team-based approach to scheduling. The information presented is based on interviews with agency management staff.

Background

After establishing permanent surveyor teams at the request of surveyor staff, the survey scheduling responsibility was shifted from supervisors to the surveyor teams.

The team-based scheduling approach is part of an effort to change the agency's culture to promote employee empowerment and team building, with the goals of decreased absenteeism; greater job satisfaction, morale, and retention; and enhanced surveyor efficiency and motivation to effectively conduct work responsibilities. Agency management believes that increased surveyor influence over their work enhances the attractiveness of the surveyor position and can contribute to increased competitiveness in recruiting and retaining effective surveyors.

Intervention

The agency's 24 long-term care surveyors are assigned to five permanent teams, although agency management plans to continue hiring and

training surveyors to establish a total of seven teams. Team membership is assessed and modified annually by agency management, to monitor and ensure optimal team dynamics and effectiveness.

Supervisors assign each survey team a set of facilities to be surveyed over a one-year period. The teams independently develop monthly schedules, which are submitted for supervisor review. If supervisors find a schedule unacceptable, they inform the team of the difficulty and the team resolves the issue. Teams are responsible for effectively accomplishing the necessary surveys in the allotted time periods, in accordance with written scheduling guidelines and requirements provided by agency management.

Surveyors work 40-hour weeks and are required to assemble in the Montgomery office twice each month for trainings and meetings. The teams otherwise schedule their own on-site survey and office time, including arranging for monthly scheduling meetings. A team coordinator oversees each team and actively participates in surveys. The team coordinator may serve as the team leader for surveys, or may assign others to the team leader role.

Implementation

Agency management announced the implementation of permanent teams and team-based scheduling to surveyors during a staff

meeting. Team membership was initially established by the surveyors themselves. Teams included an effective balance of disciplines and experience levels, and therefore were not modified by supervisors. Supervisors met as a group and assigned nursing homes to each team.

Impact

Agency management believes the transition to team-based scheduling has contributed to increased surveyor morale, decreased absenteeism, and improved retention, although it is difficult to attribute these positive outcomes to any single factor, given the recent implementation of multiple additional changes (e.g., leadership and supervisor changes, career ladders, lift on freeze of merit raises). Surveyor motivation and efficiency are perceived to have increased as a result of making surveyors partners in meeting workload requirements.

Prior to implementing the new scheduling approach, surveyors' preferences for particular facilities had been a frequent source of conflict between supervisors and surveyors, and absenteeism was common for certain facilities' surveys. By creating permanent teams and assigning each team a group of facilities, surveyors recognize their responsibility to work as part of the team to accomplish surveys even in those facilities viewed as less desirable.

Surveyors typically are effective in developing schedules that meet agency management guidelines, with supervisors providing only occasional instruction to address identified problems. Supervisors have been freed of the substantial time committed to creating and revising schedules, allowing them to focus on supervisory tasks such as coaching teams, training, and leadership activities. Supervisory

resistance and discomfort, however, has been a challenge to implementing the new scheduling approach. Supervisors continue to struggle with loss of control over surveyors and meeting milestones, given the degree of autonomy provided to surveyors. The approach compels supervisors to rely more heavily on the standard performance appraisal and disciplinary system for monitoring and guiding surveyor performance.

Agency management plans to continue team-based scheduling for long term care and assisted living surveyors on a permanent basis in view of the anticipated long term benefits to surveyor retention, motivation, and efficiency.

Lessons Learned

Agency management emphasizes that organizational and culture change require the support of the highest levels of authority. In addition, it is important that agency management carefully balance surveyor autonomy with supervisor loss of control, and to thoroughly discuss planned changes with supervisors and support them as they adapt to reduced control over surveyor decision-making. Supervisors should be encouraged to utilize mechanisms for holding staff accountable, such as performance evaluations, counseling employees, and disciplining employees who do not accomplish assigned tasks.

Contact Information

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This document is part of an issue brief on team-based scheduling 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.