

Risk Management Considerations for Key Steps to Help Prevent Abuse in Your Organization

A female entered a residential care facility. She suffered from anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and was dependent on alcohol and narcotics.

Not long after starting her treatment orientation, she alleged that another male resident sexually assaulted her over the span of a few days, before he left the facility. She felt that her care and treatment was inadequate and put her in a vulnerable and fearful state, causing her added trauma.

Since she felt that insufficient precautions had been taken to ensure her safety, she filed a legal action against the facility claiming abuse.

Organizations that fail to properly secure the safety of the population within their care are held accountable by the legal system, the population they serve, and the community whose support they rely on. They are faced with expensive litigation, front page headlines, loss of reputation, loss of volunteers, and a decline in charitable donations. Failing to prevent abuse is costly in so many different ways.

Organizations can protect themselves by adopting and implementing industry-recognized best practices. Below we have listed eight key practices to help guard against abuse.

1. Stringent employee/volunteer screening procedures including:
 - Police background checks
 - Checking all employment references
 - Confirming volunteer work history
 - Verifying educational qualifications
 - Instituting probationary periods
 - Providing written employment application forms
 - Performing regular performance reviews
2. Review the design of your premises. Identify areas within your facility that are open and provide easy access for abusers. Look for ways to redesign these areas.

3. Having a written policy that includes:

- A Mission Statement
- Complaint Procedure
- Investigation
- Disciplinary Action
- Confidentiality of Information
- Signatory page

4. Staff Training

The best way to prevent and respond to abuse is to have well-trained, sensitive and dedicated staff. Let staff know that reporting suspected cases of abuse is everyone's responsibility. Don't place employees in positions of trust and responsibility without providing the training they require.

5. Defined Procedures to Protect Whistleblowers.

Constructive whistleblowing protects the organization by increasing transparency, giving the organization an early "heads up" that things aren't right, and fosters a work environment that holds all employees accountable. It's best to learn early of unlawful practices from your employees rather than the media or a regulatory body. Before placing employees in positions of trust and responsibility, ensure they are given the support and security they require.

6. Implement and follow your policies and procedures.

7. Require that all visitors report to the receptionist, wear ID badges, and be escorted through the premises with a staff member.

8. Document all incidents, allegations, complaints, investigations and disciplinary action taken. Develop template forms that allow you to document the abuse incident and retain these forms in the event of litigation.

Few organizations can afford the financial consequences and distractions of a suit alleging abuse. The key practices listed above will help to bolster your risk management practices. Purchasing Abuse Coverage can help to alleviate some of the financial burden.

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