

Broadening Her Understanding of Healthcare

Save to myBoK

by Anne Zender, MA, director of communications

Navigating the regulations and standards related to long-term care could make anyone feel like they are lost in a maze. But in her most recent position, Mary Sidelnik, RHIA, has been able to help those interested in long-term care in the state of Texas find their way out.

Sidelnik most recently served as manager of professional services in the long-term care regulatory program in the Texas Department of Human Services. (She retired this fall.) She headed a department that studied, interpreted, and answered questions about state and federal legislation, licensure, and Medicare/Medicaid certification for long-term care facilities, skilled nursing facilities, mental retardation, assisted living, adult day care, and hospice services.

The professional services department's activities range from reviewing and tracking legislation and giving feedback on proposed rules to developing policy guidelines for facilities. They also respond to questions from regional offices, patients' family members, advocate groups, and other state agencies about the myriad guidelines surrounding nursing homes and other facilities and agencies in Texas.

Sidelnik's role was to supervise these activities and also manage the administrative aspects (budget, performance assessment, and planning and evaluating the program). For her, this role was the capstone to a 26-year career with the Department of Human Services—one that began with a job as a medical records specialist.

'Data Management Is Everywhere'

Since then, she served in numerous roles, including assistant to the division director of the professional services division and assistant to the bureau chief. Most of her staff was not HIM professionals—instead they may be nurses, social workers, or nutritionists, for example. But, she says, HIM professionals would do well to establish a place for themselves in these areas of policy interpretation, thanks to their broad understanding of healthcare systems. "There's a great need for HIM professionals in these roles," she says.

Sidelnik's broad understanding of healthcare systems extends to her interest in data management skills for HIM professionals. Though her job didn't specifically focus on this area, data management has long been one of her interests. In 1998, for example, she served as part of AHIMA's Data Resource Administrator Task Force, which explored new roles for HIM professionals in data management. "If you aren't working in data management as an HIM professional, you still have to be aware of it, because it's everywhere," she says. "I'm interested in data management because we're going to be doing more with electronic data. And because we have our own data systems for the program, and the federal government has data systems that we have to feed into. It's an area that's really wide open."

Achieving a Central Goal

As Sidelnik closes one chapter in her career, she's not sure what's ahead. She plans to stay active with her component state association and investigate new possibilities in other areas that interest her, such as alternative healing arts, end-of-life issues, and hospice care. She's also aware of how much has changed since she started out. Staying conversant with recent changes in terminology, reimbursement, and government regulations is always a challenge, she says.

Sidelnik also hopes that while HIM professionals master the technology, they don't lose their personal touch. "Our education prepares us to handle diverse groups of people and to understand how sources of information go together," she says. "Our ability to interact with other healthcare professionals can help us achieve a central goal such as meaningful information," she says. "We have good skills in that area."

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Driving the Power of Knowledge

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