

Champions for Consistency

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by Jane Jeffries, MFA

Wouldn't it be helpful to know how your peers at healthcare organizations throughout your state are handling HIPAA? Even better, wouldn't it be helpful for the healthcare consumers in your state to encounter consistent behavior at each facility they visit?

Thanks to the Tennessee HIMA's HIPAA Champions program, in which board-appointed HIM professionals educate peers in their region, many healthcare organizations in that state are on the same page with HIPAA implementation. "The HIPAA Champions have been the leading unit in the state to educate our peers and physicians and their staffs," says Rita Bowen, MA, RHIA, CHPS, a HIPAA Champion and enterprise director of health information and chief privacy officer at Erlanger Medical Services in Chattanooga, TN.

Statewide Education

Formed in June 2002 by the THIMA board, the eight HIPAA Champions' duties are to:

- work with the Tennessee Hospital Association (THA) HIPAA Task Force as necessary to support the goals of that group
- review, support, and establish community standards in implementing HIPAA regulations; identify and share sample policies
- advise the board and the executive director of needed education programs
- be willing to offer guidance and training for THIMA and other groups
- promote HIM professionals as privacy officers; promote the Certified in Healthcare Privacy (CHP) credential

Already, the HIPAA Champions have held three workshops in conjunction with local HIMAs and have an additional three planned. In some cases, the HIPAA Champions have used outside experts from clearinghouses or insurance companies to augment their educational efforts. For example, representatives from the State Volunteer Mutual Insurance Company, a professional liability insurance company for physicians, attended an educational session and later helped to deliver education to physicians.

A Valuable Alliance

One of the key factors behind the Champions' success is their alliance with THA. After forming a HIPAA task force, THA asked for THIMA's participation, and now the HIPAA Champions meet monthly through THA. One of their first tasks was to determine when HIPAA requirements preempt state privacy laws. THA supplied consultants and a lawyer to perform a preemption analysis. Then the HIPAA Champions used that analysis to pass on the pertinent information to THIMA members.

"We work to get a consensus," says Bowen of the Champions' relationship with THA. For example, under Bowen's guidance, "all the Chattanooga hospitals agreed to start using the privacy notice in mid-March. This helps all hospitals because everyone is doing the same thing." What's more, it enables all the hospitals to address implementation problems and feedback from patients at the same time in the same way.

Similarly, the HIPAA Champions' efforts recently led to a "credentialing" process for Chattanooga hospital chaplains. Through a community meeting of chaplains from area hospitals, the chaplains received HIPAA education and an ID badge.

"The goal is to get the community as consistent as possible," Bowen says. "Each hospital needs to create its own notices for its own particular needs, but at least they can be very similar."

On the Physician Front

The HIPAA Champions have also focused significant energy on educating physicians about the ins and outs of HIPAA. “There’s a lack of understanding from physician offices. They say ‘we’re not a hospital, this doesn’t apply to us,’” Bowen says, “So we give them the basic principles of HIPAA and what it means for daily operations. We show them how to make a privacy-friendly practice.”

One very effective tactic has been to take pictures of physicians’ offices and show them at educational sessions. Some shots are of patient schedules next to the scale, x-rays out of their jackets or, in one case, a patient chart next to a shut-down computer. “No one could find any problems with it until we explained that the computer had been protected but the paper chart hadn’t,” says Bowen.

The HIPAA Champions show no signs of slowing down, according to Bowen. “Issues will continue to arise that need discussion and collaboration,” she says. “This has also been an excellent means of communication” among HIM professionals in Tennessee.

Jane Jeffries (jane.jeffries@ahima.org) is the Journal’s managing editor.

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