

# Maintaining a Watchful Eye: a Privacy Officer's Reflections

Save to myBoK

by Jewelle Hicks, newsletter editor

*"I believe the position of privacy officer will emerge as a top management position....It behooves all of us in the field to be credentialed, as it demonstrates competency and knowledge."*

—Linda Walker

Last April the privacy rule went into effect, but even after one year the impact is still being felt in facilities across the country. How has the role of the privacy officer changed? What new challenges are these professionals facing and how are they overcoming them? Linda Walker, RHIT, CCS, CMSC, director of health information management and medical staff services and privacy officer for Uvalde Memorial Hospital in Uvalde, TX, gave us some insight into how the privacy rules have changed her professional life.

## Learning the Rules

Walker is the first to admit that her biggest challenge as a privacy officer has been "trying to understand the intent of the privacy rules and applying them accordingly. Initially there was a tremendous amount of interpretation, and it seemed as though the pendulum swung to the extreme," she says. "I believe everyone was stressed about implementing the rules and so determined to be compliant that we all got carried away with the 'what ifs.' Now it seems we have reached a position of what is reasonable."

Walker and her staff held a series of informative lunches with hospital staff members, physicians, board members, and volunteers to provide information on the privacy rule, address concerns, and discuss Uvalde Memorial's notice of privacy practices. "Everyone in our facility as well as our community was apprehensive about how the rules would affect the way we conduct day-to-day operations. Once we completed the training and implementation phase, the initial concerns that seemed so significant began to subside," Walker says. "Now everyone is aware of and seems to have a basic understanding of the privacy rules and the sanctions for violations. Compliance is becoming second nature."

## A Good Foundation

Memorial, including credential coordinator, director of quality assurance, and director of HIM prior to assuming her current role as privacy officer in 2002. She credits continuing education and a strong working relationship with her mentor—hospital administrator Ben Durr—as the secrets to her career success. While in the early stages of her career at Uvalde Memorial, she enrolled in AHIMA's former independent study program and was able to convert that knowledge into her current role.

## Looking Ahead

Walker is optimistic about what the future holds for privacy but acknowledges that qualified personnel will be needed. "I believe the position of privacy officer will emerge as a top management position. AHIMA offers privacy credentials [CHP, CHS, and CHPS], and it behooves all of us in the field to be credentialed, as it demonstrates competency and knowledge," she stresses. "CEOs want competent, qualified personnel, and these credentials validate competency in privacy." Walker stays up to date on the latest in privacy regulations through resources such as educational conferences, periodicals, and Internet discussions.

Walker advises others in the field to stay informed in all areas of privacy and in turn to emphasize the importance of privacy to their respective institutions. "As technology improves, we must be vigilant in our efforts to secure the privacy of all personal information, not just protected health information," she says. Thanks to privacy officers like Walker, we can be assured that only the appropriate eyes will view our most personal information. ♦

**Article citation:**

Hicks, Jewelle. "Maintaining a Watchful Eye: a Privacy Officer's Reflections." *Journal of AHIMA* 75, no.4 (April 2004): 96.

---

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.