

Staying Ahead of the Game

Save to myBoK

by Jane Jeffries, associate editor

Marilyn Houston, RHIA, had an advantage in getting her current job: she recognized the need for it. While serving on an information security task force as a representative for the Palm Beach County Health Department (PBCHD), Houston wrote the medical records portion of the State of Florida Department of Health Information security policy.

"Because I had helped write the policy, I was automatically dubbed the information security coordinator," Houston says. "It just fell into my lap." Similarly, because Houston was staying current on HIPAA regulations, she became responsible for HIPAA implementation for the PBCHD as well and was appointed to the Department of Health statewide HIPAA task force.

Giving Back to the Community

Houston's HIM career began in high school when she worked in medical records in a hospital. "I was lucky. I got into a field I liked really early," Houston says. And after working in several different facilities, Houston found that public health was her niche.

"I have one of the best jobs in the world. No question. I have such a wide range of information to deal with, so my job is never dull," she says. Because she works in a health department, the scope of her job includes the security of vital statistics, epidemiology and reportable disease records, records retention, and clinical matters. Houston also manages health information for environmental health issues like class action law suits for restaurants with foodborne illnesses, day care inspections, and water main breaks. Plus, Houston relishes the opportunity to serve her community. "Public health is something we should all be involved in. You're caring for your community and environment."

Getting a Jump on HIPAA

The PBCHD in West Palm Beach, FL, is building on current policies and procedures in preparation for HIPAA. The health department has been training staff on information security since 1996 and put in place a formal program on confidentiality that includes paper trails and specific information access for each position.

"The IS policy is going to lead us to where we're going with HIPAA. I think we're a little ahead of the game," Houston says. She will also be responsible for implementing the changes that are mandated by the state. "My role is to coordinate between [the state] and our information technology staff about what we need to do."

Although Palm Beach County is moving forward with HIPAA preparation, Houston expresses some concern about other facilities. "HIPAA is taking so long to come about that people think it's probably not going to come to fruition. People are saying 'I didn't think it was something I should know about,'" Houston notes. "We've done a lot [of preparation] in Florida, but that doesn't mean we're not going to have to re-tweak policies and rewrite procedures. We have state and local policies, but a lot of places don't have that and they take a long time to develop. For people who are saying 'I can do this in six months,' it's going to be a surprise."

Houston's guiding principle is protecting patient information. "I'm trying to make sure everyone understands the importance of security and confidentiality. It's not a barrier to care—it has to be a partner with care. We don't want to make information security a roadblock, we want to maintain the law and still have patient knowledge."

Houston is encouraged by a recent success in the PBCHD. When meeting with representatives from social agencies to discuss patient issues, the health department needed a way to identify patients without sharing patient identifiers. Now they use URNs (unique reporting numbers), a combination of the patient's date of birth, name, and date of service. Says Houston, "We're not trying to block care or services, just meet our obligations and provide privacy."

Article citation:

Jeffries, Jane. "Staying Ahead of the Game." *Journal of AHIMA* 72, no.2 (2001): 108.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

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