

VA Program Bridges Skills Gap, Improves Performance

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by Evelyn Zongl-Milbrand, RHIT, CCS

When I was hired as the assistant director of the HIM section with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLAHS), I faced a major challenge. Congress had recently required the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) to submit claims to third-party payers for the reimbursement of provider outpatient services and inpatient professional fees. Previously, Congress had given the funding to the Veterans Health Administration to provide for the veterans. This mandate necessitated a cultural and educational change.

The VA's need to comply with this mandate, plus results from prior internal and external audits, heightened the need to reduce our high-risk potential for fraud and abuse. As a result, we had to acquire specific expertise from coding professionals to ensure compliance and reduce risk.

Assessing Our Needs

My first responsibility was to assess the technical expertise of the current coding and billing staff. I found that the majority of the staff acquired their skills on the job without any formalized training, especially in the areas of insurance billing. Yet, with an increase in third-party billing and data capture for alternate VA-only revenue allocation streams, the facility's concern with potential fraud and the accuracy and integrity of data to maintain the organization's reputation and to support appropriate coding grew. We needed good coders, fast.

From networking with my HIM peers, I learned that HIM professionals didn't think the federal government could match the salary range for coders in private facilities. Further, hiring and retaining qualified and credentialed coders had already been difficult for all hospitals for years. I had to take an active role both in marketing the VA as a desirable employer and expanding and maintaining the skills of my existing coding staff.

A VA-tailored Curriculum

Coding vacancies were announced internally to determine the availability of local coding experts, and then the positions were announced to the public. Then we discussed creating an internal training program: we wanted to develop and emphasize a learning environment. We wanted a customized on-site coding certificate program through a college accredited in health information technology. HIM section managers worked with East Los Angeles College (ELAC) to create a curriculum and atmosphere specifically directed at career development and enhancement with mentoring.

The HIM section and ELAC met to prepare a complete needs analysis outlined with specialized courses designed to meet the VA's needs. An 18-month curriculum was VA-tailored and accelerated into a 10-month course. The intense curriculum included anatomy and physiology, pathology, advanced patient ICD-9-CM coding and abstracting, ambulatory care coding (CPT), and a directed practice (cooperative education), which provided the students with an opportunity to practice their coding knowledge at nearby private facilities. All of the courses were provided on site at the VA West Los Angeles Campus with the exception of anatomy and physiology, which required a laboratory component.

The training opportunity was intended for employees whose current positions required them to know coding and billing and those who worked in coding, the business office, and in the ambulatory care clinics. However, the program was open to everyone, with special preference given to employees who had already completed HIT coursework in the past or held positions in the HIM section, the business office, and ambulatory care.

Of the 100 employees who applied, 30 qualified and 15 were selected. The selected employees juggled work, studies, and family obligations with a 40-hour-per-week schedule consisting of 20 hours on the job and 20 hours of coursework in the classroom. Participants studied for tests and did homework on their own time. GLAHS paid total tuition costs and covered all books and registration expenses.

Retaining the Experts

Leadership at VA GLAHS is looking for ways to retain the graduated coders while maintaining their skills. Many graduates were offered coding positions from non-VA facilities prior to completing the coding certificate program. Positions in the HIM section, the business office, compliance, ambulatory care, and the veterans equitable resource allocation unit have been created for the newly trained coders. Prior to taking on these positions, the coders will spend a month in the compliance office.

Among the lessons we learned: in today's healthcare environment, HIM department managers must monitor the needs of their coders at every expertise level and provide a sense of job satisfaction. Besides educational opportunities, employers should consider flexible hours and other perks to hire new coders and retain those you have.

The program provided each employee with clinical and technical skills, knowledge, and expertise to perform accurate and appropriate judgement of ICD-9-CM and CPT coding based on supportive provider documentation for billing and reporting. This in turn ensured data integrity and reduced high-risk potential for fraud-related activities.

Benefits of Cooperation

Working together, the HIM sections and ELAC maximized existing resources, which allowed the employees to apply training directly to their current job function, increased their opportunities for upward mobility, and fostered a more positive attitude. VA GLAHS management benefited by its ability to determine training criteria, establish training selection requirements, and to enjoy the improvement of job performance through increased employee motivation. VA GLAHS and ELAC enjoyed a truly symbiotic relationship in achieving what we both wanted: general academic excellence.

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