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Perception of Compliance Changed With its COVID-19 Work; 'Compliance Became a Value Add'

By Nina Youngstrom

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, a lot of myths about the virus and health care practices floated around, and some employees brought them to work. For example, there was talk of triple-bagging patients who died of COVID-19 at the hospital as if they were still infectious. To set the record straight, the compliance department at Luminis Health in Annapolis was asked to develop a document with the facts on safe spaces, staffing, supplies and equipment, which is posted on a drive for all employees and updated daily. Compliance became “the one source of truth,” said Chief Compliance Officer Shirley Knelly, who found that her team’s work this past year has been a game changer for compliance.

“In the pandemic, we had an opportunity to shift the mindset” about compliance from a historical view of policing to adviser/collaborator, Knelly said. Employees and leaders long had the perception that they couldn’t tell the compliance department about their concerns or problems because they would “get in trouble” or because compliance would be an “impediment to progress,” she explained. “People sometimes have a fear of compliance and become defensive.” But as the pandemic unfolded, with a slew of waivers from CMS and the HHS Office for Civil Rights and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a more realistic picture of compliance emerged as it tracked and explained all that material and joined the Luminis Health emergency incident command for the first time. “This was our transition, and we took advantage of it. We wanted to shift the perception,” Knelly said. “I think we are doing better work. We in compliance were seen as a collaborator and partner and really bringing value.”

That’s one of the lessons learned from a year of operating in the pandemic, according to three compliance officers who shared their experiences at the Health Care Compliance Association’s regional conference March 5 in Washington, D.C.^[1] They agreed their risk assessments and work plans have to be agile, that remote working requires creativity to keep people engaged, and that virtual training has its benefits.

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