

WHITE PAPER / **HEALTHCARE CERTIFICATION**

GUIDING HOSPITALS: THE JOURNEY TO JOINT COMMISSION CERTIFICATION

BY Scott Myers

Across the U.S., more than 22,000 healthcare facilities pursue accreditation through The Joint Commission, and the standards are rigorous and complex. Finding an industry professional who can navigate the process will lead to timely, cost-effective results.



EXPLAINING THE COMMISSION AND COMPLIANCE NEED

The Joint Commission is one of the oldest healthcare accrediting bodies in the U.S. More than 22,000 healthcare facilities seek accreditation or certification through the organization by complying with the standards outlined by the commission.

Hospitals hoping to achieve accreditation or certification should proactively prepare management programs and implement policies and procedures to achieve compliance. Once a survey is completed, any findings need to be addressed, including those related to safety, hazardous materials, waste management and other environmental concerns, as well as those dealing with patient care.

Those organizations who achieve the commission's Gold Seal of Approval — meeting demanding performance standards in delivering quality, safe care — must undergo an on-site survey at least every three years, or every two years for some laboratory settings. Following survey completion, organizations must address any issues discovered by the survey team.

Many hospitals seek certification through The Joint Commission because those that are certified are deemed eligible to receive Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement. While there are other ways to achieve reimbursement eligibility, The Joint Commission is one of the few organizations whose standards and survey processes also meet or exceed the standards developed by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

EXISTING CERTIFICATION PROCESS

Hospitals are complex, multifaceted organizations made up of multiple departments that must work together to keep things running smoothly. However, oftentimes each department operates as somewhat of a silo, making decisions and choices independently. This compartmentalization can be particularly challenging when it comes to achieving certification, as many departments are often not fully aware of the intricacies of others' operations and compliance requirements.

Though many hospitals hire highly qualified staff for individual departmental roles, the coordination efforts across departments can often be disjointed. When an organization takes a more universal approach to program management, not only are issues framed in a more comprehensive light, but buy-in from leadership becomes easier and this approach allows for more cost-effective management solutions in the long run.

One of the biggest challenges for facilities is that staff members often lack the knowledge of how to interpret the regulations appropriately and the resources necessary to implement the regulations. Or, staff members may struggle with how to implement the requirements on their own.

If an issue does arise, many hospitals currently parse out remediation efforts to different departments, rather than embrace a coordinated approach to resolving the issue.

Oftentimes, management strategies are reactive to issues discovered during the survey, after they are flagged for concern, rather than proactively identifying issues and addressing them prior to the survey.

A MORE HOLISTIC APPROACH A COHESIVE STRATEGY

Utilizing a third-party firm to help guide a hospital through the process, using an all-inclusive approach, can better serve all departments in the long term.

For instance, a world-class healthcare facility located in St. Louis, Missouri, hired Burns & McDonnell to assist with regulatory compliance preparedness and achieving certification through The Joint Commission. Our team also has been on-site during multiple triennial surveys performed by The Joint Commission, to support hospital staff and kick-start corrective action planning. Regulatory compliance preparedness activities include coordination of a comprehensive sweep of the entire hospital to identify any Environment of Care or overall health and safety concerns.

By taking a more proactive approach — and developing mock audit survey procedures with hospital staff before commission evaluators arrive at a facility — hospitals are able to identify issues early, implement overarching policies and procedures to maintain and document compliance, and prepare staff for what to expect during the actual evaluation.

If issues are discovered and addressed before a survey visit, those shortcomings won't threaten a hospital's accreditation. Adopting more proactive and comprehensive solutions — rather than rushing around to find a temporary solution after the fact — also saves time and money. An outside firm that understands this concept can help hospitals develop and maintain quality of care and safety practices that maintain compliance before, during and after The Joint Commission surveys and other regulatory reviews.

SMOOTH DEPARTMENT RELATIONS

An outside firm also can help hospitals implement a more multidisciplinary approach and make decisions based on what's necessary, or required, for the hospital as a whole. This is a direct change from the traditional mindset and process of making independent department-level solutions that might not account for the entire picture.

This overarching strategy assists in developing collaboration between departments, keeping the focus on what's most important: patient care and environmental health concerns that need to be addressed.

This holistic approach not only cuts possible tension and conflict between departments but also often results in greater buy-in from organizational leadership.



IDENTIFY OVERALL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Conducting a mock survey before evaluation provides hospitals with critical feedback about the current state of the facility and helps avoid any unwanted, last-minute surprises during The Joint Commission evaluation, and any associated remediation efforts.

Mock surveys and a proactive management approach can help a hospital identify any existing environmental safety concerns, deficiencies and potential patient care issues, and abate them prior to the Joint Commission survey.

A third-party advocate can help coordinate subcontractors and repairs, establish necessary committees and management plans, and develop tracking systems to maintain compliance.

SAVE ON COSTS

Taking a more holistic approach to managing The Joint Commission standards will help hospitals save money by creating hospitalwide strategies to economically identify and mitigate existing issues and allow for successful multi-departmental coordination to implement solutions that maintain compliance with The Joint Commission standards on a continual basis.

GUIDING HOSPITALS THROUGH THE COMMISSION VISIT

A trusted consultant also can be a valuable resource in preparing hospital staff for the commission survey. Knowledgeable and experienced health and safety professionals can outline what the process will look like, help staff prepare for the most likely questions and increase general staff awareness of the survey process.

Hospitals will be in the best position for their site visit by determining existing deficiencies and preparing early. A third-party can serve as an on-site advocate for hospitals by assisting the organization in proactively identifying and mitigating issues that need to be addressed.

Once survey findings are delivered, an outside party hired to help with the process can decipher the findings and develop action plans and standard operating procedures to gain — and maintain — compliance.

After the site evaluation, hospitals often have a tight window to complete the necessary changes. Depending on hospital size and survey duration, changes could be required shortly after survey completion.

Enlisting the help of a trusted consulting firm gives hospitals access to a wide pool of resources, including personnel with extensive experience and knowledge

in the areas of safety management, waste segregation, chemical storage, air emissions and fire/life safety as they quickly try to coordinate efforts to address any notable concerns.

CONCLUSION

The Joint Commission accreditation often sets a hospital up for success, but preparing for the regular visits and creating policies and strategies to maintain compliance can be a complex undertaking. Relying on a third-party professional to help navigate the process not only encourages hospitals to take a more proactive, interdisciplinary approach, but also can assist in every step of the commissioning process, saving an organization significant time and money.

BIOGRAPHY

SCOTT MYERS, an environmental project manager at Burns & McDonnell, has experience in delivering a multitude of services — including regulatory compliance, environmental remediation design and site investigations — to utility, industrial and healthcare organizations in St. Louis and surrounding areas. Recently, he served as an on-site project manager tasked with interim environmental manager duties at a world-class hospital facility.