



THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE

What is a nursing home’s biggest risk factor for a lawsuit? Your answers might include such things as resident falls, pressure ulcers, or elopements. While these incidents happen, they fortunately don’t automatically lead to litigation. Instead, the biggest factor is the people involved – the staff and the family members. If families perceive staff indifference or a lack of concern or caring, the facility becomes a prime target for a lawsuit, regardless of the incident itself.

Not long ago, a famous attorney who is credited with developing the strategy for successfully winning lawsuits against nursing homes was asked, “What should nursing home providers do to avoid being sued?” His response was simple and direct, “Providers should maintain a close, personal relationship with residents and their families. And, be honest if there is a problem; promptly report it to the family and apologize if they are in the wrong.” In essence, what he was telling nursing homes to provide was good customer service!

Most nursing home providers see themselves as customer-oriented, but unfortunately, few of their staff have received formal training on customer service regarding what keeps residents happy and their families satisfied. As a result, staff tendency is to run the other way when “difficult” family members enter the building, or they view family members’ complaints as bothersome instead of opportunities to show how much they care about those in their charge.

The following tips will help your facility to become more customer service oriented.

1. **Provide customer service training for all employees who have contact with residents and families.** It is a mistake to think that administrative staff are the only people who need good customer service skills because they are the ones who families turn to when there is a concern. Studies have shown the following:
 - 1-5 percent of families will direct their complaints to the facility’s administration;
 - 45 percent will voice them to direct caregivers; and
 - 50 percent will never complain, even if there is a problem, because they see their problems as insignificant.
2. Customer service training should be taught as an expectation of assigned duties and a tool that staff can use in their daily interactions. According to Beicher, author of A

“The Importance of Good Customer Service”

Reference:
Beicher, T. (2003). *A Facility-Based Risk Management Program: A Practical Guide for LTC Providers*. Washington, DC: American Health Care Association.

Facility-Based Risk Management Program, customer service orientation should include such expectations as the following:

- Smile and greet each resident or family member who you pass in the hallway;
- Immediately respond to resident and family member requests;
- Interrupt politely when an interruption is necessary; and
- Apologize for resident or family inconveniences.

A review of customer service skills should be included in each employees evaluation and recognition should be given to employees as indicated.

- 3. Include basic listening skills in your training.** To actively listen includes listening for not only the concern, but for the solution that the resident or family is expecting, and meeting those expectations. Beicher suggests some basic listening skills:
 - Stop what you are doing and make eye contact when someone addresses you;
 - Be at the same eye level;
 - Use positive body language (e.g. lean slightly toward person, hands at side);
 - Acknowledge what is said, agree and say “yes” whenever possible; and
 - Project confidence and competence.
- 4. Additionally, develop a step-by-step complaint process and train staff accordingly.** Remember, 45 percent of families voice their concern to direct caregivers, so training should include the following:
 - If danger is indicated, go immediately to the resident and assess the situation;
 - Validate the concern and express gratitude for bringing it to your attention;
 - Ask questions to gain more understanding;
 - Restate concern for confirmation;
 - Express empathy, such as “I see how upsetting this is for you;”
 - If indicated, apologize for the inconvenience or not meeting expectations, such as “I’m sorry this situation has been so frustrating for you and your family.”
Note: in this type of situation, apologizing is not an admission of guilt, but simply a validation of the family member or resident’s feelings and emotional reaction to the situation;
 - Decide on a realistic and workable course of action with the family member and stress what can be done rather than what can’t be done;
 - Ask if there is anything else they would like done right now;
 - Say what you’re going to do and do it;
 - Provide feedback as soon as possible; and
 - Report to the proper authority and document the complaint or problem and the conversation with the family member or resident.
- 5. Build and strengthen family relationships, beginning with the admit process and following through with intermittent contacts thereafter.** While staff may view the admission process as a series of mundane tasks, families perceive it with uncertainty and anxiety. Therefore, it is important for staff to be cognizant how each admission task has the potential to affect families either positively or negatively, so they leave the right impression. In the immediate post-admission days, family members should be contacted to see how things have gone and how they’ve been treated in order to head off any lingering misunderstandings or potential problems. These types of brief purposeful

contacts should be performed intermittently throughout the year in order to maintain a positive relationship.

6. **Don't neglect out-of state families or those who can't visit their loved ones often.** In addition to intermittent phone contacts, consider arranging intermittent e-mail correspondence, as the family desires and permits. A simple picture of their loved one enjoying an activity with a brief note saying that you "wanted to let them know that mom had a great day today" can combat guilt-ridden feelings that family members suffer when they can't visit their loved one as often as they would like. It's also important to plan care conferences with speaker phones so that families feel like part of the team.
7. **Lastly, use satisfaction surveys to convey to families that you are interested in their concerns; and take them seriously.** The distribution of a survey that solicits anonymous responses is one of the most reliable methods for determining what family and residents feel about your facility. Don't look at them as being a venue for complaints, but instead see them as being an opportunity for improvement. When you put together your survey, keep these things in mind:
 - Keep it simple by using checkboxes or rating scales that are easy to fill out and compile later;
 - If you are mailing the survey, include a postage-paid or tear-off postcard for easy return. Also, provide an e-mail option;
 - Develop questions that will help you gauge your customer service (e.g. do you feel staff listens to you? Are their responses timely?);
 - Be careful about conducting more than one survey a year, as you will need the time and manpower to address any concerns that are voiced;
 - Summarize and prioritize survey responses, then address them;
 - Distribute results to staff, listing both the things done well and things that need improvement.
 - Briefly communicate to the participants of the survey what the results and your responsive actions were. Thank them for their participation and encourage open communications in the future.

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