Aging Services Risk, Quality, & Safety Guidance

Media Relations

Executive Summary

According to the old cliché in journalism, “If it bleeds, it leads”: The more shocking, frightening, or provocative a story is, the more likely the media are to report it. Healthcare organizations are settings rife with opportunities for these kinds of stories. As a result, sensational healthcare stories are often front-page news.

But the relationship between the media and a healthcare organization does not need to be an adversarial one. A good working relationship between media entities and healthcare organizations should be mutualistic. Newspapers need stories to tell, websites need clicks, and TV news must fill air time. Positive news, such as when a local school visits the facility during the holidays, can help the media do their job while helping generate goodwill for a healthcare organization.

The individual or committee responsible for media relations at a long-term care facility fulfills several purposes, including informing the public about beneficial services and programs, as well as responding officially to media inquiries when newsworthy events (both positive and negative) occur. Media relations and risk management perform complementary functions and should establish a consistent working relationship.

Ignoring the media is never the answer. The media are not going to “just go away.” It is often difficult to predict whether the media will present a story that is positive, negative, or neutral about a healthcare organization. The only certainty is that the media will continue to pursue and report on stories they believe the public wants to hear. Organizations should thus apply a risk-management-based approach to media relations in order to improve resident satisfaction, avoid liability, and avoid reputational harm.
Action Recommendations

─ Develop training tools, reference materials, and frequently asked questions for staff about dealing with the media.
─ Appoint media liaisons for both the media and internal staff and make sure both parties know who those individuals are.
─ Use the arrival of any representative of the media on the premises as an opportunity to reiterate facility media policies to the media as well as to medical staff members and volunteers.
─ Coach designated staff members on interviewing techniques.
─ Instruct staff to direct all media inquiries to a media relations liaison, and emphasize that members of the media have a job to do and will not “just go away.”
─ Cultivate relationships with the local media to ensure that each side has a better chance of being aware of newsworthy events.
─ Inform media relations of newsworthy events, whether positive or negative.
─ Invite members of the media to the facility for positive stories, such as the 100th birthday of a resident or announcements of community partnerships.
─ Establish informal relationships with certain members of the media in order to give them “scoops” and help them stay ahead of stories.

─ When possible, ask to see a reporter’s list of questions before the interview or to see the final story before publication or broadcasting.
─ Develop a policy to distribute to members of the media that outlines expectations, regulations, and frequently asked questions regarding the facility.
─ Develop familiarity with the risks and benefits related to facility interaction with different types of media.
─ Approach news conferences using a risk-management-based approach.
─ Foster a culture in which employees are encouraged to report and tell the truth and integrity is valued.
─ Establish an environment where employees feel comfortable bringing issues of concern to leadership before they consider speaking out to the media.
─ Make certain that the organization’s policy addresses risks related to filming, photography, and other types of recording.
─ Assign an individual to monitor mentions of the facility on social media in real time to stay on top of stories.
─ Include provisions for media relations in the facility’s disaster plan.

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