Turn-Over Proofing Your Safety Program

By: Stephen Frew and Beverly Figge, Loss Control Consultants, Thomas McGee- A Division of Risk-Strategies

In a long-term care environment, where consistent oversight of infection control, emergency preparedness, and regulatory compliance is crucial, a revolving door of leadership can have profound consequences. Whether it's a spike in injuries, increase report lag time or a dip in staff confidence, the effects on the facility financial stability and the overall resident well-being can be significant. Studies show that high turnover among leadership in healthcare settings correlates with increased workers compensation incidents, potential liability issues, knowledge gaps and costly training expenses.

The Crucial Role of Safety Officers in Long Term Care

Leadership in nursing homes are more than just compliance gatekeepers. They are the linchpin for creating and maintaining safe environments where residents can thrive, and staff can focus on caregiving without fear of preventable harm. These roles include regulatory compliance, infection control, emergency preparedness, and staff training, among others.

When an experienced leader leaves, the repercussions can be intense and far-reaching. Not only is there a temporary gap in expertise, but onboarding a replacement also requires a significant investment in time, training, and budget – and during this gap, many essential safety functions might be overlooked.

Common Reasons for Leadership Turnover

Recognizing why safety officers leave is the first step in solving the issue. Common factors include:

- *Workplace Stress and Burnout*: The constant pressure of managing emergencies, ensuring compliance, and troubleshooting hazards leads to emotional and mental fatigue.
- *Limited Resources*: Understaffing and tight budgets often leave safety officers feeling unsupported, hampering their ability to implement effective programs.

- *Lack of Professional Growth*: Without clear pathways for advancement, some may leave for better opportunities in hospitals or larger healthcare systems.
- *Inadequate Organizational Support*: If leadership doesn't visibly back safety initiatives, the officer can feel undervalued and frustrated.

Addressing these concerns proactively can save your facility the costs and risks associated with turnover, while simultaneously strengthening your care environment.

Administrative Support for Safety

If the facility administrator wants to improve safety officer retention, the first and easiest place to start is with their own commitment to the safety program. The staff of every organization responds to what the boss does, not what they say. Leadership buy-in needs to be demonstrated on an ongoing basis for the organization to take something seriously.

Make it clear to directors and managers that they are expected to meet periodically with the safety officer to discuss challenges, celebrate successes, and identify opportunities to improve safety and compliance. Include safety metrics in leadership performance reviews to signal that everyone is accountable for a building a safe and compliant environment. Encourage teams—such as nursing, housekeeping, and maintenance—to share in the responsibilities for safety checks and hazard reporting, reducing the burden on one individual.

BudgetLline Items

Nothing says that a Safety and Compliance program is actually important to management than its own annual budget line – if it is important enough to be a budget item, it is important enough for managers to pay attention to on a regular and long-term basis. Budget for safety programs, training, equipment, and other resources. Cover the costs for your safety officer to attend relevant conferences and obtain certifications (e.g., Certified Healthcare Safety Professional).

While you may not be able to afford internal support for your Safety Officer, you can take some of the burden from the individual by facilitating external collaboration and support through programs and support offered by your professional organizations and your insurance carriers at reduce fees or no charge.

Recognition of Safety as a Team Effort

Within your organization, you can easily conduct brief daily or weekly "safety huddles" to address immediate concerns and to encourage open communication. Additionally, implementing recognition programs to publicly celebrate safety milestones – such as achieving a quarter with zero fall incidents – can reinforce the team effort behind safety success.

Competitive Compensation and Benefits

The final element of Safety Officer retention always comes down to whether the organization is adequately compensating the Safety Officer for performing their role when others might be offering more.   Organizations should periodically review salaries and benefits packages against market data to ensure your facility remains competitive in attracting and retaining skilled professionals, but in addition to market-place adjustments, achievement incentives are also a big factor in retention. Provide bonuses or merit raises tied to measurable improvements in incident rates or compliance scores. To make incentives attractive, however, the organization must offer the support to make real improvements achievable.

Why Retention Matters for the Bottom Line (and Beyond)

High turnover can be costly: each time a safety officer departs, the facility loses continuity in policies, potential progress on key initiatives, and the relationships that officer has established with staff and residents. In an era of ever-increasing regulatory scrutiny, maintaining a consistent safety presence helps minimize compliance risks and liability issues. A strong safety culture is often correlated with better resident outcomes, reduced injuries, and improved staff satisfaction—all of which shape your facility's reputation and financial stability.