

## Long-Term Care Survey Alert

### SURVEY MANAGEMENT ~ 5 Key Strategies Give You A Protective Edge In A Negative Media Event

**Develop a media management plan before reporters are banging on the door.**

You know that even the best of facilities is only one survey gone wrong or unavoidable accident from ending up under the media magnifying glass. That's why you need to get staff on the same page for managing the media -- now.

**Chilling story:** Imagine opening the newspaper to read a headline about your facility: "Nine Violations Put Nursing Home Lives In Jeopardy." That's what happened to staff at a Tennessee nursing facility recently who read how their facility failed to "protect residents from harm, prevent and treat bedsores and follow doctors' orders." Reading between the lines, you know that verbiage comes from the CMS 2567, but the public doesn't.

"Just as a facility has a disaster plan for hurricanes, it needs one to deal with the press," says **Sheryl Rosenfield, RN**, a consultant with **Zimmet Healthcare Group** in Morganville, NJ. Consider these key strategies for working with the press to provide the "rest of the story."

**1. If the media reports survey concerns about your facility, be prepared to reassure the residents/families** that they are "safe and cared for," advises Rosenfield. Say "As a clinical team, we will figure out and address what went wrong, but you are safe."

**2. Don't stonewall the press hoping they will go away in the aftermath of an adverse event at your facility.** The press "will do the story whether you cooperate with them or not," cautions **Amy MacKenzie**, marketing and volunteer coordinator for **Lutheran Homes of Oshkosh** in Oshkosh, WI, a continuing care retirement center with a SNF level of care that had a deadly fire in its independent living section. One of the biggest mistakes facilities can make when reporters contact them is to say "no comment," says Mackenzie. That tactic can spur the press into believing the facility has something to hide.

**Alternative:** If you don't have the information that a reporter wants to know, say so, advises MacKenzie. But "set a timeframe for when you will have the information and will call the reporter."

**3. Prepare to answer the 5 W's.** "You don't have to tell the media everything," says MacKenzie, "but if you do your homework up front and answer who, what, when, where and why, you'll go a long way toward satisfying what the press wants to know," she counsels.

**Tip:** designate "a very limited number of people to speak to the press on the facility's behalf," suggests Rosenfield. Lutheran Homes' CEO served as the spokesperson.

**4. Counter allegations with facts but don't downplay the problem or shift blame.** For example, in the story about the Tennessee nursing home, the facility administrator educated readers by stating that "Unfortunately, if the skin is fragile, there are some unavoidable bedsores. But we're doing everything we can to prevent them." The administrator also laid out steps the facility had taken to improve pressure ulcer care, noting that "a lot of that was already being done, but we are better documenting those practices," the paper quoted the administrator as saying.

**Know when to let go:** Getting defensive with the press can sometimes keep a story alive when the press obviously has a particular slant, cautions **Dale Lind**, executive director of **Waterman Village** in Mt. Dora, FL. His facility attracted a lot of press coverage when it transferred a woman from its special care unit because the facility wasn't set up to meet the resident's needs.

The resident's son challenged the transfer all the way to an administrative law judge -- and he took the matter to the press. Lind found the media wasn't interested in the facility's perspective on the dispute.

"So we went on with business as usual, which is sometimes the best strategy," Lind advises.

**5. Be prepared to control reporters' access to the premises and protect residents' privacy.** In the aftermath of the fire, Lutheran Homes had reporters clamoring to get in the facility to interview people. So "we posted key leaders at the doors and wouldn't allow the press in -- even though it was snowing," says MacKenzie. We didn't fall for the 'I need to use the bathroom' trick. We told them to go go to the nearby gas station."

**Good news:** The media ended up working with Lutheran Homes, says MacKenzie. "The spin they put on the disaster in terms of our response to it was ultimately in our favor." She attributes that outcome, in part, to the fact that the facility had a good relationship with the press before the fire. The facility often hosted the media to show off the good things the facility was doing.

**Lesson learned:** Put the positive spin about your facility out now -- whether it's a lemonade ice party on a hot day in August or landscaping efforts or the drills your facility is doing to be prepared [for emergencies]," advises Rosenfield. "People don't toot their own horns enough." Rosenfield suggests creating opportunities for intergenerational relationships and even adult relationships through book clubs and hobbies, as examples. "Find ways to get those stories to the media."