

Long-Term Care Survey Alert

SURVEY MANAGEMENT: Beware--Media Coverage Can Spark Press, Survey Woes For All Facilities

The best strategy: Be prepared.

If you read a negative story about a nursing home and breathe a sign of relief that at least it isn't yours, exhale slowly and consider this: Your facility could be next.

Not only will the press be contacting the facility that has had a negative incident, but facilities in the area should be prepared to answer media inquiries, says **Amy MacKenzie**, marketing and volunteer coordinator for **Lutheran Homes of Oshkosh** in Oshkosh, WI, which had a fire. In the aftermath of that tragedy, "the media contacted other facilities in the area to see if they had sprinkler systems -- and if not, why," MacKenzie relays. "The paper ran a story identifying which retirement facilities did and did not have sprinklers."

Lesson learned: A reporter's next call may be to you, wanting to know what your facility is doing about a sensational event or issue reported in the media, such as another facility's survey woes, elopement, resident-to-resident violence or sexual predators in nursing homes, to cite some recent examples.

Where the press goes with its coverage of long-term care and other health care issues -- surveyors often follow by cracking down on those same issues in facilities. For example, "it's not unusual for surveyors or other public officials to pile on after a disaster," says **Joseph Bianculli**, an attorney in private practice in Arlington, VA.

"Major public health education initiatives can also cause press and even surveyors to focus on timely issues, such as flu vaccination, TB, etc.," says **Howard Sollins**, an attorney with **Ober/Kaler** in Baltimore.

Example: "Some years ago, the media were publicizing a public health push for PSA testing of men," says Sollins. "A surveyor shortly thereafter asked a nursing home questions about PSA testing in the facility."

Protect Your Facility With These Strategies

1. Track coverage trends for long-term care and health issues in the paper and television and other media. Think through what you might say if the press -- or surveyors -- ask you what your facility is doing about them. Take a close look at your facility's own policies and procedures for managing such issues. And anticipate problems that could make great fodder for press coverage, especially on a slow news day.
2. If you do have an elopement, accidental death, etc., document how the facility responded and followed its policies and procedures, advises Bianculli. That way you can explain all the steps your facility took to prevent or manage the problem.
3. Communicate with staff, families and referral sources in the aftermath of a negative outcome, adds Bianculli. Family members have been known to get the media coverage -- and F tags -- rolling by complaining to the press when they are unhappy with how a facility handled an incident, cautions Bianculli.