

## OASIS Alert

### Human Resources: 5 WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR HOME HEALTH WORKERS FROM OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

These checklists help you keep workers safe and improve retention.

If you're looking for ways to keep your HHA employees safe and on the job, the **Centers for Disease Control** has a nifty new 51-page resource for you, and we've got some information about how you can improve upon an important point it missed.

Occupational Hazards in Home Healthcare, which is co-written by the **National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health** identifies the top hazards, as well as good tips.

Don't miss the checklists at the end of the booklet that help workers think about how things as simple as the shoes they wear or talking on the cell phone while driving can impact their safety.

Some top dangers, according to the report, include:

- overexertion;
- stress;
- guns and other weapons;
- illegal drugs;
- verbal abuse and other forms of violence in the home or community;
- bloodborne pathogens;
- needlesticks;
- latex sensitivity;
- temperature extremes;
- unhygienic conditions, including lack of water, unclean or hostile animals, and animalwaste; and
- long commutes from worksite to worksite leading to transportation-related risks.

#### How to Address Occupational Hazards

The second step is to develop prevention strategies. Here are some helpful tips for the top five most common hazards:

1. Overexertion: You may wish to consult with a professional who has expertise in patient-care ergonomics. This will help you to determine when assistive devices may be necessary. These professionals should also provide equipment training.

2. Latex Sensitivity: Provide workers with nonlatex gloves when there is minimal contact with infectious materials. If the potential exists for contact with infectious materials, select gloves that pass the ASTM F1671 penetration test for resistance to bloodborne pathogens. Many manufacturers have appropriate gloves for infectious materials.

If latex gloves are selected provide reduced-protein, powder-free gloves and also provide training to supervisors and staff on latex allergy. Arrange a medical evaluation for workers with early symptoms and for those with allergies and then ensure homes are kept clean, perhaps with a vacuum with a high-efficiency particulate air filter.

**3. Bloodborne Pathogens:** Make sure to meet all the requirements of the OSHA bloodborne pathogens standard. Eliminate the use of needle devices whenever safe and effective alternatives are available. Provide needle devices with safety features and determine which are most effective and acceptable. Establish an exposure-control plan; evaluate and update annually.

**4. Occupational Stress:** Provide frequent, quality supervision and agency staff support along with adequate job training and preparation. Hold regular staff meetings where problems, frustrations and solutions can be discussed. Include lunch breaks and sufficient travel time in workers' schedules.

**5. Violence:** Develop a standard definition of workplace violence and create a zero-tolerance policy. Ask employees to report each incident. Regularly conduct training on workplace violence. Inform workers of assignment risk and teach them how to assess safety work environment and surroundings.

For instance, train staff on how to recognize verbal abuse; and how to identify different types of illegal drugs and drug paraphernalia. Then, give them the tools needed for safely addressing these problems.

#### What the Report Misses

The NIOSH may be looking at musculoskeletal injuries through rose-colored glasses, notes attorney **Robert Markette** on his blog. The report recommends that workers use devices to lift patients, as nursing facility workers do. "This is a good point, but the authors seem to have overlooked a key problem," Markette notes. "Home health and facilities are different -- [workers] go into a patient's home and often rely upon the equipment the family has obtained."

One possible work around, Markette suggests, is to consider how your employees are going to transfer the patient during the care planning stage. Perhaps Medicare will foot the bill for some medically necessary equipment.

**Key:** The **Bureau of Labor Statistics** projects that home healthcare employment will grow by 55 percent between 2006 and 2016. So, while recruitment is high on any HHA's list, retaining those workers and keeping them safe should be just as high. Your strategy must include creating a healthy work climate.

**Resource:** Read the full document, and access all tips and checklists for home healthcare workers' safety, at [www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-125/pdfs/2010-125.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-125/pdfs/2010-125.pdf).