

Critical Incident Reporting

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION

A Tool to Improve Performance, Service, and Safety





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One of the most powerful tools in the prevention of violence in the workplace is the use of incident reports as a means to assess risk factors, recognize and monitor trends, and identify training needs. Unfortunately, incident reports are often viewed as a “necessary evil,” designed primarily to provide a factual record in the event of litigation. Although most organizations have an incident report form, that form is seldom part of a larger system—a plan for documenting that is incorporated into an organization’s policies and procedures.

There are five key areas to be addressed in such a plan, and they are addressed in this booklet as follows:

1. Defining an incident.
2. Designating the key players.
3. Developing an incident report form.
4. Determining follow-up procedures.
5. The importance of training.

Writing and evaluating incident reports can be a constructive process. Like many other operational procedures, it will only be as proportionately productive as the amount of commitment made by an administration. If it is looked upon as a “necessary evil,” it will become exactly that. However, if it is approached as a constructive procedure designed to strengthen the framework of existing policy, it will serve as a valuable tool for staff, administration, and, ultimately, the people in our care.

Regardless of the scale in which it is used, documentation will provide the information necessary to produce standardized, accurate incident reports. It is our hope that by accomplishing this, staff will become more confident in their abilities, resulting in a higher level of service to those in their care.

1

DEFINING AN INCIDENT

The first step is to determine what events meet the definition of an “incident” within your organization. Do staff know what types of situations should be documented? If this definition is not clear, staff members often underreport incidents. This happens for a number of reasons:

1. Many employees dislike writing. Completing an incident report seems like another burdensome, time-consuming paperwork requirement.
2. Staff often believe that assaults by clients are just another part of the job—an expected event that does not require documentation. Staff members might even be concerned that writing an incident report reflects negatively on their own competence (e.g., “If I had handled this situation correctly, this incident never would have happened.”).
3. Experience might tell them that little is done to address the safety issues raised by incident reports, so why bother?

For all of these reasons, it is important that expectations about incident reporting are clear, beginning with an understanding of what constitutes an incident. One suggested definition that can be adapted for individual facilities is as follows:

“An incident is any out-of-the-ordinary occurrence that results in injury, property loss or damage, or use of physical force or restraint, involving employees, visitors, or individuals in your charge.”

Threats to commit these acts may also be included in your definition of the word “incident.” Verbal abuse is also often included in policies. By using this definition, staff are made aware that incident reporting is reserved for events that carry a certain level of significance. Although we are usually more concerned about the failure to document than we are about the overuse of incident reporting, the latter can also be a problem. Sometimes staff members are so concerned about documenting conscientiously that they write incident reports about events that do not require this level of reporting. For example, a care home manager expressed frustration because he spent two days of every month doing nothing but reviewing incident reports. His staff wrote multiple incident reports on a daily basis for events such as refusal to take medication or other instances of noncompliance. Time spent writing unnecessary reports meant less time spent with care home residents.

It is often helpful to draw distinctions for staff members regarding which types of events require an incident report and which require some other form of documentation, such as charting or logging. Charting or logging procedures allows staff to document certain occurrences without imposing the more detailed requirements of an incident report. In the example cited above, the staff could have charted a resident’s refusal to take medication, thus creating an accurate record of how often this occurred, what time of day it was most likely to happen, who the staff member attempting to give the medication was, and any other relevant data. If the refusals became a problem that required consultation with management staff or referral to a physician, the necessary information would be available in a clear, succinct format—without the need for an incident report.

Be sure that you do not overlook this first and very important step in developing a documentation plan for your facility: define the word “incident” for your staff.

2

DESIGNATING THE KEY PLAYERS

The second part of the documentation plan is to designate who the key players will be when an incident occurs. Your policies and procedures should answer questions such as these:

- **Who is to be notified immediately after an incident?**
- **Who will collect information and interview witnesses after an incident occurs?**
- **Who will be responsible for writing an incident report?**

Each of these questions raises several issues that need to be considered by your facility.

Management staff might not wish to wait until incident reports are completed before they are informed of incidents. Some facilities require that managers be informed immediately of any incident requiring documentation. Others specify immediate reporting only for certain types of incidents. This should be spelled out for staff. When do you want to be called in the middle of the night and when can it wait until morning?

The second question raises the important issue of adequate training for staff members who are involved in collecting information and interviewing witnesses or participants to obtain an accurate and complete account of the incident that occurred.

Interviewers use two primary methods to obtain information: one is to request a narrative statement from a witness, and the other is to ask questions. The first method produces the most accurate information, but it is often incomplete. The second method produces more complete information, but it is likely to include more inaccuracies. Do your interviewers know the most effective means to get around this dilemma? Do they know how to set the stage for a productive interview? Are they skilled in asking questions without “leading” the witness? Are they aware of interviewing techniques to avoid? Although few incidents will actually result in litigation, every incident should be approached with the thought, “If I were testifying about this incident, would I be comfortable with how this information was gathered and the way this report is written?”

That brings us to the third question. Who will write the incident report? Will you ask every person who was present to write a report? Only staff members? Or will one staff member interview all witnesses and participants and then write a comprehensive report detailing his/her findings? How will you handle witnesses and participants who are unable or unwilling to write a report? What about staff members who have such poor writing skills that their reports would be more of a liability than an asset? Should you consider the option of audiotaping or videotaping statements?

There is not one correct answer to each of these questions; individual facilities face different challenges and have different needs. **Two points are critical: the established procedures should be reviewed and approved by your organization’s legal counsel, and they should be followed consistently.**

3

DEVELOPING AN INCIDENT REPORT FORM

The incident report form used by your facility can make a big difference in the quantity and quality of the information you receive from report filers. Incident report forms should be designed to make it as easy as possible for staff to complete the reports. Use check-off boxes or fill-in-the-blank responses wherever possible (e.g. day, date, time, shift, location of incident). Take a look at your incident report form and see if it includes the following items:

- Day, date, and time of the incident.
- Name and title of the person writing the report.
- Exact location of the incident.
- Conditions (e.g., weather, lighting, wet floor).
- List of key participants and their relationships to one another.
- Complete description of the incident in chronological order.
- What led up to the incident?
- At what point were you alerted to the incident?
- What verbal and/or physical interventions were attempted?
- How was the incident resolved?
- Emergency action taken (e.g., did you summon police, security, and/or medical assistance?).
- Consequences (e.g., injuries; property loss or damage).
- Persons notified of the incident (include name/title/date/time).
- Persons receiving a copy of the report (include name/title).
- Signature of the author and date of the report.

Statements from key participants may be part of one comprehensive incident report, or they may be attached as supplemental reports; follow your facility's policies and procedures. Be sure to indicate if statements were given willingly or unwillingly.

4

DETERMINING FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES

The final, and in some respects most critical, part of your documentation plan is to determine what happens to the completed incident report. Who will receive the report and what will be done with it? Incident reports can be far more than a factual record in the event of litigation. They also serve at least three other functions:

1. They provide a detailed account of an incident so that appropriate follow-up action can be taken. This can include both positive and negative consequences.
2. They provide a reliable tool for administrative evaluation of policies, procedures, performance, and patterns.
3. They improve the efficiency and safety of staff by educating them about potential dangers and how they might be prevented.

It is unlikely that these functions will be served if the incident report is simply filed away in a cabinet or on a computer. If incident reports are to be tools for improving performance, service, and safety, they must be studied by a safety committee, a risk manager, or some other designated individual or group. The designated person or committee must be capable of examining the data objectively, looking for patterns, identifying barriers to staff performance, and suggesting new or revised policies and procedures to minimize or prevent future episodes of workplace violence.

5

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Improving the quality of incident reporting in your organization requires more than just a good documentation plan. If employees do not have the knowledge and skills to carry out the plan, your policies and procedures can actually work against you. Policies and procedures that sit in a ring binder in the supervisor's office but are not implemented on a daily basis leave your facility in a vulnerable position when you are surveyed by a regulatory agency or accrediting body or if you are involved in litigation because of an incident.

All employees need to know what events require documentation and what is expected of them in terms of that documentation. Most employees will also benefit from additional training and practice in how to write an incident report, including instruction in how to write objectively, distinguish facts from assumptions, avoid hearsay, and eliminate jargon. Employees responsible for interviewing witnesses and participants must be trained to do so in a way that will not compromise the validity of the information that is gathered. Managers should be trained to analyze incident reports and provide their employees with feedback (both positive and negative) when incidents occur.

When a solid documentation plan is in place and employees are well trained, incident reporting is a powerful means of improving performance, service, and safety in your facility.



INCIDENT REPORT FORM CHECKLIST

Your incident report form should be designed to make it as easy as possible for your staff to write accurate and complete reports. Listed below are some items you may wish to include on your report form as reminders to staff to address these areas. Use this checklist as a guide in assessing your current incident report form. (Note: Not every item is applicable to every incident.)

- Day, date, and time of the incident.**
- Name and title of the person writing the report.**
- Exact location of the incident** (e.g., address, floor of building, room number, hallway).
- Conditions** (e.g., weather, lighting, slippery floor).
- List of key participants and their relationship to one another.**
 - Names/titles of staff involved.
 - Names/addresses/telephone numbers of witnesses.
 - Names/addresses/telephone numbers of injured or acting-out persons.
 - Identify persons as staff, clients, students, patients, visitors, etc.
- Complete description of the incident in chronological order.**
 - What led up to the incident?
 - At what point were you alerted to the incident?
 - What verbal and/or physical interventions were attempted?
 - How was the incident resolved?
- Emergency action taken** (e.g., called police, security, medical help).
- Consequences** (e.g., injuries; property damage).
- Persons verbally notified of the incident** (include name/title/date/time).
- Persons receiving a copy of the report** (include name/title).
- Signature of the author and date of the report.**

Note: Statements from key participants (staff, acting-out persons, and witnesses) may be part of one comprehensive incident report, or they may be attached as supplemental reports; follow your facility's policies and procedures. Be sure to indicate if statements were given willingly or unwillingly.

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CPI is the standard-setting provider of behavior management training that equips employees to have an immediate, tangible, and lasting positive impact on the people and organizations they serve. Through a variety of specialized offerings, CPI training empowers professionals with a set of practical actions they can apply both in and out of the workplace.

Since 1980, more than six million individuals have participated in CPI's *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*[®] training, which teaches proven techniques for managing disruptive and assaultive behavior. This transformative training is led by deeply committed, experienced Instructors who have seen firsthand that these prevention and intervention strategies can save lives. Learn more about how CPI educates, empowers, and enriches at crisisprevention.com.



10850 W. Park Place, Suite 600 • Milwaukee, WI 53224
800.558.8976 • 888.758.6048 TTY (Deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired)
Fax: 414.979.7098 • Email: info@crisisprevention.com • crisisprevention.com