

Ten Activities for Managing People in Urgent Care

Alan A. Ayers, MBA, MAcc

Content Advisor, Urgent Care Association of America

Vice President of Strategy and Execution, Concentra Urgent Care

How well an urgent care center manages people contributes to its long-term success. High turnover, poor patient experiences, and lack of productivity are all symptoms of HR shortcomings that negatively impact the bottom line. The following ten activities provide the structure for managing people and can help the urgent care operator deal with the wide range of human resources issues encountered on a daily basis.

1. DEVELOP DETAILED JOB DESCRIPTIONS AND AN EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK

The starting place for effective HR management is outlining clear expectations—what does the urgent care center expect of each employee in his or her role? Every employee should have an up-to-date job description—compliant with anti-discrimination laws—that describes:

1. General areas of responsibility;
2. Essential functions of the job;
3. Required knowledge, skills, and abilities;
4. Required education and experience;
5. Physical and mental demands of the job; and
6. The work environment.

Expectations are also set through an up-to-date employee handbook. HR policies and procedures are often dictated by state and federal laws and include topics such as when pay periods start and end, how overtime is paid, how vacation is accrued, how performance is evaluated, and how employment-related concerns are addressed. Some flexibility should be built into HR policies to avoid locking management into a particular course of action.

Employment-related lawsuits typically consider how well an employer follows its own HR policies so management and employees should understand and follow the handbook consistently. HR policies affecting employee's interaction with the organization should be segregated from operational policies and procedures. Legal counsel should review the HR handbook to assure it's compliant with the law, preserves management rights, and is fair to employees.

2. INVEST IN HIRING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

An urgent care center functions much more smoothly when it has the right people “on the bus.” If a center is hiring two out of every three people it interviews—it's not being selective enough. Although there's immediate gratification to filling a position to remedy short-staffing, ultimately getting rid of an unproductive or problem employee costs far more in terms of lost time, hurt morale, and heightened legal risk than investing time up front in hiring.

Recruiting starts with a legally sound employment application that asks the right questions of applicants, notifies applicants of drug testing policies, and contains disclaimers for conducting background checks and pre-employment testing. Applicants with shady pasts will often “self-select” out of the process upon learning that licenses will be verified, criminal and driving histories will be obtained, and Medicare exclusion lists will be consulted.

Managers and providers the candidate will work with should participate in the interview process and pre-employment testing should assess the candidate's competence in key job skills. For example, how familiar with a medical assistant with IV fluid administration? How well does a front desk candidate understand insurance terminology?

When a staff member leaves unexpectedly, there is a tendency in organizations to promote whoever is available. Although promoting internally has advantages, promoting someone who is not ready for additional responsibilities does nobody any favors. The organization should engage in succession planning—developing a “bench” of future managers so they'll be ready to move up when opportunities occur.

3. DOCUMENT GOOD AND BAD STAFF INCIDENTS

Urgent care centers invest significant effort in patient care documentation to assure proper reimbursement, but are often passive in documenting staff performance. Staff members should receive regular performance feedback both verbally and in writing. Detailed documentation of critical incidents involving staff—both good and bad—assures a clear paper trail to justify decisions related to promotions, terminations, and pay raises. This documentation can be invaluable should legal problems arise. Documentation should include:

1. A description of the employee's behavior;
2. The applicable policy or standard of conduct;
3. An explanation of how the behavior supports or violates the policy or standard;
4. A description of the action that's being taken as a result of that violation;
5. Constructive counseling on what can be done to correct the behavior; and
6. A description of what may happen if the behavior occurs again in the future.

Positive critical incidents occur when staff members contribute above and beyond their normal duties. Recognizing positive incidents enhances job satisfaction and gives management a more balanced view of performance. Tying pay increases to positive performance may also prevent disciplinary issues from getting out of hand.

4. UTILIZE PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE

Most states recognize employment as being “at will,” meaning an employee or an employer can unilaterally terminate the employment at any time for any reason—except for reasons that are prohibited by law. However, termination should occur only as a last resort after the employee has exhausted all steps to correct an issue. The exception is egregious offenses involving theft or endangering the safety of patients or other staff. Progressive discipline (verbal warning, written warning, suspension and then termination) gives the employee a chance to make positive changes and provides documentation that will eventually support a termination. If an employee can correct his or her issues, then termination may be avoided.

5. IMPLEMENT ANTI-SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES

There is a tremendous variance in education, salary and social authority of physicians and medical assistants. Add that many doctors and medical assistants are of the opposite sex—medical practices are ripe for sexual harassment. Sexual harassment claims can result in costly litigation and embarrassment for the urgent care center and individuals involved. The urgent care center should have a clear culture against sexual harassment. A written policy should be developed that defines what sexual harassment is, how sexual harassment claims are handled, and what steps will be taken to prevent sexual harassment from occurring in the future. Similar policies should be developed for all other types of discrimination, consistent with federal, state and local laws. These policies should be communicated to all employees, documented in the employee handbook, and posted alongside required employee notices.

6. PROPERLY ACCOUNT FOR OVERTIME

Unless an employee is in a management position “exempted” from overtime, overtime is generally paid for all hours worked in excess of 40 during a workweek. Failure to properly account for overtime can trigger a “wage and hour” investigation under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act. Because of the intricacies of these regulations, it may be best to have an outside party conduct an audit of job descriptions, scheduling and time card practices.

Overtime may be reduced by integrating part-time staff and staggering start/end times. Not all staff members need be present to open or close the center (although for safety reasons, a single staff member ought not open or close alone).

If a center opens to the public at 8:00am, staff should be present, supplies should be counted, and systems should be operational to see the first patient at 8:00am. Likewise, if the center closes at 8:00pm, any patient walking through the door up until 8:00pm should be seen. A center that sees its last patient at 7:30pm doesn't "close" at 8:00—it closes at 7:30! By having some staff members arrive and leave early—or creating part-time "opening" and "closing" shifts—the center can assure adequate coverage while reducing overtime pay.

7. HAVE ESTABLISHED POLICIES FOR HANDLING AUTHORIZED ABSENCES

The employee handbook should contain clear-cut policies on time away from work—including vacation, work-related and personal injury and illness, and other reasons. Policies must be consistent with state Workers Compensation acts, federal and state anti-discrimination acts, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Any organization employing more than 50 people must also comply with the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, which gives employees rights of unpaid leave up to 12 weeks per year. Contingencies should be in place should any critical staff member take a leave of absence. When locums or temporary providers are necessary, a quick-reference guide to processes, systems, coding and documentation standards can help assure a seamless patient experience. Often the same issues—cold/flu epidemics and bad weather—that drive visits through the door also contribute to staff absences so the center needs to have a staffing continuity plan.

8. OUTSOURCE PAYROLL

Managing wages and overtime; calculating taxes and complying with reporting mandates at the federal, state and local levels; and creating forms, submitting payments and printing checks can be a full-time job requiring specialist skills. Payroll mistakes contribute to legal liability, dissatisfied employees, and regulatory hassle. Calculate the amount of time spent on payroll today and determine the value that would be gained by spending that time on more productive activities—odds are it's cheaper to outsource payroll than to do it in-house. In addition to improving compliance and reducing fraud risk, outsourcing payroll often enables advanced technologies like digital time cards and direct deposit.

9. MATCH STAFF SCHEDULES TO PATIENT VOLUME TRENDS

"Idle hands are the devil's playground." Many urgent care centers see their greatest patient volume between opening and noon, with a lag in visits occurring mid-afternoon. When there is insufficient volume to keep staff busy, mischief can get the best of them—leading to a myriad of HR issues. An established urgent care center should be able to anticipate time-of-day and seasonal trends in volume and staff accordingly. Reducing staffing levels during off-peak times reduces payroll expense while creative staffing arrangements make it easier to find and retain good people.

For example, many mothers with young children find it's easier to arrange for childcare if they can work three 12-hour shifts per week while mothers with school-aged children often seek employment that will get them home by the time school lets out. When the personal needs of staff members can be matched to center visit trends—a win-win results for the staff and center—boosting employee morale and loyalty. Even when a center is staffed appropriately, idle times will occur. Activities such as taking inventory, calling or corresponding with patients and/or employers, and auditing charts, should be available and expected of the staff.

10. DON'T WAIT TO GET LEGAL COUNSEL UNTIL AFTER PROBLEMS ARISE

When serious HR issues arise—such as a sexual harassment complaint, suspension or termination of employment—urgent care operators often feel they can resolve them without outside advice. Actually it's less expensive to get counsel early in a situation—a 30-minute call to an attorney can assure the action about to be taken is legal, and if a lawsuit is filed, that a proper defense has been documented.

Establishing a human resources framework that includes solid management training, effective policies and procedures, and fairness in dealing with staff members will lead to legal and equitable personnel decisions, positive morale and a sense of pride in the center that will be reflected in every patient interaction.