

Leadership: Timely Incident Reporting

*By: Stephen Frew and Beverly Figge, Loss Control Consultants, Thomas McGee- A
Division of Risk-Strategies*

In the long-term care industry, incident reporting plays a critical role in maintain a high standard of resident care and overall safety. From minor mishaps to more serious events, timely and accurate reporting ensures that problems are addressed quickly, lessons are learned, and residents and staff receive necessary medical care promptly. Many facilities, however, struggle with underreporting or delayed reporting due to workload pressure, fear of blame, or uncertainty about reporting procedures.

What are incidents?

An “incident” in a long-term care facility is any event or circumstance that results in – or has the potential to result in – harm to a resident, staff member, or visitor. For example, an incident might involve slips and falls, medication errors, equipment failures, abusive behavior, breaches in infection control protocols, or even a “near miss”. This article will focus on resident and visitor safety issues.

Enhancing Safety

In elder care settings, residents are often physically frail and may have complex medical conditions. Incident reporting ensures that red flags –such as repeated falls or medication near-misses – are recognized promptly. By identifying these events promptly, facilities can introduce targeted interventions, modify protocols, add new equipment, or add staff training skills to reduce future risks to the specific resident or residents in general.

But let’s be clear, while a note in a patient chart may document that a patient was found on the floor, their physical condition, and the medical care that was rendered, the incident report is a separate report that details the factual details of what and how the event happened so that leadership can implement corrective measures and enhance safety in the future. The incident report may also prove vital in liability litigation defense.

Editor’s Note:

The KING Safety Matters newsletter is published quarterly to provide general safety information. It is not a substitute for adequate safety training, or intended to provide complete safety information or training, on any specific subject. The information contained herein is intended to assist safety efforts and increase safety awareness.

To ensure the contents of the newsletter are helpful and important to you, please feel free to send comments, suggestions, and feedback to:

Beverly Figge, CSP
Loss Control Consultant
Thomas McGee L.C.
bfigge@risk-strategies.com

Rachel Monger
President/CEO
KING
rachel@leadingagekansas.org



How to document an incident

Whether an incident report is a paper form or part of a digital system, the goal of the documentation is to record the details of the event thoroughly and in enough detail to allow a root cause analysis of the event. A well-documented report should include:

- **Basic incident details:** date, time, and location of the incident
- **Individuals involved:** identify any residents, staff, or visitors affected
- **Description of event:** provide a clear, factual account of what happened
- **Any injury or damage:** give full details of any injuries or damage observed
- **Immediate actions taken:** Detail the response, including first aid, medical evaluation, or corrective actions
- **Witness statements:** list witnesses and their contact information; include their observations
- **Photos:** photographs of the entire scene prior to any clean-up are often helpful
- **Follow-up:** document what actions were taken in response to the incident
- **Signatures and review:** ensure the report is signed by the submitting staff member and reviewed and signed by appropriate supervisors or administrator

It is critical that the reporting staff member sticks to “nothing but the facts” rather than opinions, assumptions, or personal feelings. The goal of the report is not to assign blame but to document the details from which a root cause review and safety decisions can be made going forward. By writing the details on the order they occurred, it helps focus on facts and details.

When documenting be careful to use the witness’s words as closely as possible, but you may paraphrase. You may ask a witness to write a statement to include in the report and have the witness sign and date the statement.

When to write an incident report

Report even a minor incident as promptly as circumstances permit, and within the same shift if possible. The longer the time between an incident and its documentation –even hours –the greater the risk of missing or inaccurate details. Lag time in reporting increases the chance that the initial problem will cause more harm, affect more residents, or recur without correction.

Long-term care facilities operate under strict state and federal regulations that mandate incident reporting. Persistent lags in reporting can put a facility at risk of citations, fines, or more intense scrutiny during surveys. In addition, if an incident leads to legal claims, delayed reporting can weaken a facility’s defense and undermine public trust in its services.



“No Blame” Reporting

One of the most common barriers to timely incident reporting is fear of blame or punishment. Staff members often worry that reporting an error or incident might jeopardize their job or cause friction within the department and a reluctant to file reports. Management can address this issue by championing a “just culture” approach in theory and in practice by focusing on system deficiencies rather than assigning fault to individuals.

Building incident reporting skills

Knowing when, why, and how to report an incident does not come naturally to staff members, so facilities should make incident reporting as simple as possible by making instructions, forms or digital systems, and examples readily available in all work areas. In addition to formal on-boarding, ongoing training can keep staff alert to the importance of immediate reporting. Short in-service sessions, refresher videos, or digital reminders can reinforce key points and keep incident reporting awareness in the busy work environment. When administrators and nursing leaders consistently demonstrate that they prioritize thorough, timely incident reporting, staff are more likely to follow suit.

By streamlining procedures, fostering a no-blame culture, and engaging leadership in the incident reporting and safety process, long-term care facilities can significantly reduce lag time and safeguard the integrity of their incident data. When staff understand that incident reporting is about improvement rather than punishment, they become more willing to report issues as soon as they arise. The result is a facility that learns from mistakes, adapts quickly, and provides the best possible care for residents.

