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AAAHC Report Identifies Opportunities for Quality Improvement in Student Health Centers

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Now more than ever, health care organizations should prioritize quality improvement (QI), with a focus on infectious disease protocols and emergency plans. Student health centers in particular face significant challenges as colleges navigate their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than 80% of colleges and universities have resumed in-person classes this fall or offer a hybrid of online and in-person instruction, according to a Chronicle of Higher Education tally of nearly 3,000 institutions. Health experts have described campuses as high risk for the spread of coronavirus through shared dorm rooms, communal bathrooms, and dining halls – making ongoing QI initiatives all the more essential.

Support for Quality Improvement

Providing organizations expert insight on how to improve their performance and quality of care, the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care (AAAHC) recently released its 2020 Quality Roadmap. The annual report examines compliance with current AAAHC Standards based on onsite accreditation surveys conducted January 1–December 31, 2019, including surveys of 64 student health centers.

Health care organizations can use this tool to identify themes that deserve special attention as they pursue ongoing QI. While most deficiencies are comparable to previous years' findings, given the COVID-19 pandemic, the report underscores the need to address Standards related to infection prevention, safe injection practices, and emergency preparedness.

“As student health centers adapt to meet the expanded support and service needs demanded by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is our goal to enhance understanding of AAAHC Standards and instill an accreditation mindset,” said Belle Lerner, assistant director, AAAHC Institute. “The Quality Roadmap, along with other AAAHC resources such as educational programs and webinars, is designed to help organizations integrate best practices at their centers throughout the 1,095 days of the accreditation term.”

High-Deficiency Findings for Student Health Centers

Analysis of survey data from student health centers identifies four areas with AAAHC Standard deficiencies of 10% or greater.

Credentialing, Privileging, and Peer Review

The three highest deficiencies were found under Standards related to credentialing, privileging, and peer review, which are three separate but related processes. Deficiencies in any of these areas can lead to providers performing services or procedures for which they need additional qualifications, more experience, and/or improvement.

Notably, the top deficiency cited in nearly 20% of surveys was the failure to meet the AAAHC Standards regarding the approval of appointment and reappointment decisions by a governing body. The purpose of these Standards is to confirm that the governing body ensures that health care professionals are qualified to provide services offered by the organization and that those services are appropriately staffed and supervised.

The two other reported deficiencies in this category are related to the following Standards requirements:

- Conducting primary or secondary source verification of credentials is in accordance with the organization's written procedures for credentialing.; and
- Using the results of peer review as part of the process for granting continuation of clinical privileges. Using the results of peer review as part of the process for granting continuation of clinical privileges.

Infection Prevention and Safe Injection Practices

11% of student health centers did not meet the Standards requirement that the infection prevention and control program have a designated director with appropriate training and current competence.

"The AAAHC Standards centered on infection prevention and control have never been more important for college campuses," added Lerner. "Today, health care organizations that serve the needs of student populations need to be vigilant about adherence to these practices to promote health and safety throughout the campus for both staff and students."

Deficiencies with Standards specific to infection prevention and safe injection practices place patients at risk and are a potential liability for organizations. All centers, including colleges and universities must address these issues promptly and regularly to ensure compliance with Standards and delivery of high-quality patient care.

Emergency Preparedness

Similar to infection prevention measures, Standards related to emergency preparedness currently necessitate a heightened level of consideration and compliance. These guidelines help ensure that organizations are prepared for all types of emergencies, such as fires, active shooters, natural disasters, and pandemics.

Approximately 11% of student health centers were cited for not conducting scenario-based drills of their internal and external emergency and disaster preparedness plans. Such drills should be practiced quarterly.

Documentation

Another key deficiency that surveyors cited was documentation, primarily as it relates to patient allergies and medication reconciliation. This includes documentation of the presence or absence of allergies, sensitivities, and other reactions to drugs, materials, food, and environmental factors. Such information should be in a prominent and consistently defined location in all clinical records.

The purpose of documentation related Standards is to ensure patient safety and quality of care, as well as consistency and a means to identify errors or lapses in process. In addition, thorough records better assist in negotiations with payers or liability insurers and provide vital back-up for any litigation.

Quality Roadmap for Next Steps

Whether a student health center is preparing for an accreditation survey, in preparation for a reaccreditation survey, or conducting a mid-cycle self-assessment, the findings of the 2020 AAAHC Quality Roadmap can help guide planning and goal setting to ensure continuous improvement and excellence.

Student health centers can leverage the findings in the 2020 AAAHC Quality Roadmap to create a QI culture that is integrated into day-to-day operations, which in turn will improve patient and employee safety and quality of care. The report offers recommendations for compliance and provides useful guidance to:

- Understand common deficiencies and compare these findings to the most recent onsite report and annual self-assessment
- Guide review of policies, procedures, and practices to ensure they are relevant and meet AAAHC Standards
- Leverage patient safety toolkits and other AAAHC resources to improve and assure quality
- Share and discuss findings with others in the organization to drive decision-making on QI studies or other corrective action

“In line with AAAHC’s 1095 Strong, quality every day philosophy, which promotes ongoing commitment to quality improvement and safety, the 2020 AAAHC Quality Roadmap can help student health centers adopt best practices for the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond,” said Lerner. “We encourage organizations to review and discuss the Quality Roadmap findings and work together to drive collaboration and help all team members focus on improving the quality of care they provide.”

Take advantage of industry resources, such as webinars and toolkits by visiting www.aaahc.org. To download the complete 2020 AAAHC Quality Roadmap, [click here](#).

ABOUT AAAHC — Founded in 1979, AAAHC is the leader in ambulatory health care accreditation, with more than 6,100 organizations accredited. We accredit a wide range of outpatient settings, including ambulatory surgery centers, office-based surgery facilities, endoscopy centers, student health centers, medical and dental group practices, community health centers, employer-based health clinics, retail clinics, and Indian/Tribal health centers, among others.

AAAHC advocates for the provision of high-quality health care through the development and adoption of nationally recognized standards. We provide a valuable survey experience founded on a peer-based, educational approach to on-site review. The AAAHC Certificate of Accreditation demonstrates an organization’s commitment to providing safe, high-quality services to its patients—every day of the 1,095-day accreditation cycle. It is recognized by third-party payers, medical professional associations, liability insurance companies, state and federal agencies, and the public. For more information on AAAHC, please visit www.aaahc.org.