



Making Employer Advisory Councils Work for You

■ FRANK H. LEONE, MBA, MPH

Whether you are just now incorporating occupational health into your service mix or have a burgeoning occupational health component, an Employer Advisory Council is an excellent idea.

In general, a council should include at least 12 members (providing a cushion against no-shows) and consist of a mix of owners, company CEOs, and HR personnel that reflect your service area. Be certain to include both high-profile candidates and worker bees from both client and non-client companies.

There are numerous ways in which such a council can be valuable to an urgent care clinic:

- **As an advisory body**—A council can provide your clinic with an ongoing vehicle for insight, advice, spot checks on your clinic's performance, and new ideas.
- **As a publicity vehicle**—In this age of cost consciousness, provider-employer "coalitions" can serve as an example that a local business is making every effort to be fiscally responsible—and that you're a key part of that effort. This tends to play well with the media and throughout the community.
- **As a reward to high-volume clients**—If particular companies drive your occupational health component (or if you think a client could be such a customer in the future), a "seat" on your council provides a good hedge against losing them to another provider.
- **As an entrée to highly targeted prospects**—Are there some prospect companies that you would like to bring on as clients? A seat on your council is a good place to start.
- **As a credibility enhancer**—Know a "mover and shak-

er" in the community? A slot on your council would provide added credibility to your clinic.

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Several guidelines should govern council membership:

- **The "right" number of seats**—An average attendance of six-to-nine council members per meeting is about right. But to get that many at a meeting, you probably need twice as many council members. Therefore, strive for a range of 12-18 members at any one time.
- **Make a council seat a valued commodity**—Capping the number of seats (e.g., 15) and adding new members only to replace previous members guards against devaluation of the privilege.
- **Establish finite council terms**—Establish a finite council term, such as two years. This ensures more active interest during the term, and the council seat appears more "special." If you start from scratch with 15 council members, appoint five members for a one-year term, five members for a two-year term, and five for a three-year term. That way, you will establish a rotation of new members each year, ensuring a continuous supply of new blood and energy.
- **Replace non-participants**—A certain council member misses three meetings in a row? Unless there are mitigating circumstances, his or her membership should be revoked. Again, you are establishing value.
- **Elect a rotating council chair**—Most councils tend to be chaired by a representative of the sponsoring clinic. Yet, the council is really an *employer* council. I suggest that council members elect one of their own as chair every year.



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- **Multiple clinics = multiple councils**—Let's say your organization encompasses several clinics in several communities. Develop a separate council for each community (or clinic) and have one or two members of each council form a "Super Council."

Finally, how should a council function?

- **Give them a charge**—Be careful not to make your council appear self-serving; this breeds disinterest and then disintegration. Position your council as a task force to "provide solutions to significant workplace health and safety challenges."
- **Keep it going**—Councils should meet as often as six times a year in order to create and sustain momentum. Ninety minutes per meeting is about right. The optimal time of day (breakfast, lunch, after work) and day of the week vary; council member preferences should be polled via e-mail.
- **Neutral turf**—Meetings *should not* be held at your clinic, in order to minimize the risk of the dreaded self-serving image. Keep rotating the venue in order to minimize the "same-old, same-old" feeling. Locations that make sense include private rooms at local restaurants and conference rooms at employer workplaces.
- **Publicize your efforts**—Send a press release and updates to local media ("Local provider-employer task force tackles worker absenteeism"). Send e-mail blasts detailing task force progress and findings. Add a section to your website and include a roster of council members, if not their photos and biographies.

An Employer Advisory Council can provide your clinic with new insight concerning employer perspectives, ideas for new services, and a vehicle for taking the marketing "high road." ■

TAKE-HOME POINTS

- Use your council as a publicity vehicle, pointing out that such coalitions look for ways to keep healthcare spending down.
- Remember the council is for employers; members should elect one of their one as chair annually.
- Keep interest among members high by giving the council an objective.

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