



Hospital Security Challenges & Solutions During the Pandemic

Security has an important part to play in ensuring things run smoothly so that medical staff can prioritize patient care and keep accreditation compliance on track. Security is there to mitigate risks, diffuse tensions and prevent intrusion, injury and loss. In times like these, there is no room for a security failure or unattended post.

Front-line workers—specifically nurses, doctors and other clinicians—remain at the forefront of our collective conscious as we mark the two-year anniversary of the global COVID-19 pandemic making its way to the U.S. The reverberations of the pandemic have affected each and every corner of the hospital, from cafeteria workers to administrative professionals and security teams. And the omicron variant has taxed workforces like none before it.

COVID 19 AND HOSPITAL SECURITY

From the start of the pandemic, security departments were called to implement new protocols and processes almost overnight. Limiting visitors meant turning away well-meaning and concerned family members. Enforcing masking policies and taking

temperatures were new twists in a security official's job. And all along, state and federal guidance around masking and social distancing fluctuated, creating friction within the community and requiring no small amount of flexibility and agility among security staff. Not surprisingly, a fall 2021 survey by National Nurses United found 31% of hospital RNs reported an increase in workplace violence, up from 22% in March.

Things got increasingly complicated last year with the rollout of vaccines. There were outdoor vaccination sites to be set up and secured from a traffic flow and crowd perspective. Protecting the actual vaccine shipments and their subsequent (and complicated) storage fell to security staff. Then came the need for crowd control, as people clamored to get that first dose. By year's end, the scenario shifted to protests over vaccine mandates, a challenge that has lingered on for months.

With Houston Methodist Hospital being at the forefront of the vaccination efforts since the very beginning of the pandemic—as well as being the first hospital to mandate the vaccine—it has been the target of all kinds of threats and protests from individuals who disagree with the hospital's position. For that reason, “over the past two years, while those evergreen threats never waned, we had to mitigate every single threat along with all of the many new and complex scenarios surrounding the pandemic to layer on top of existing risks,” said Hadji Sarr, Director of Public Safety, Houston Methodist.

The current wave of the highly infectious omicron variant has taxed employees like never before, both security and clinical staff. That means the clinical staff needs to lean all the more heavily on security to keep the peace in sensitive areas of the hospital.

RAMIFICATIONS

Even as the risks and challenges mount, licensing and regulatory requirements are as stringent as ever. Hospitals accredited by the Joint Commission or the DNV, or that serve patients on Medicare and Medicaid, are subject to regular surveys and audits of clinical staff or patients, as well



as compliance with stated policies around a host of issues—including security. There is much documentation to be maintained, and if any shortcoming is documented, individuals and the institution itself suffer fines, penalties and potential ramifications from accrediting organizations. Should the facility fall short of accreditation standards, the consequences are severe and have ripple effects in terms of ability to continue profitably serving patients and employees.

TECH TOOLS EXTEND SECURITY TEAMS

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Technology has been a boon to hospital security, freeing up staff to focus on more strategic needs. Methodist, for one, is leveraging robots to patrol certain areas and cameras for physical security. Access controls make it easy to keep bad actors at bay and know exactly who has entered which area of a facility and make it possible intervene in instances of unauthorized access. Access gates, badge readers and intercoms go a long way toward deterring, detecting and delaying issues and incidents. The technologies behind access controls are becoming more sophisticated with dual-factor authentication and biometric readers, representing a tremendous opportunity for mitigating an unauthorized healthcare facility breach.

Technology is also helping hospitals like Methodist train security teams and staff. Virtual and augmented reality tools make it possible for trainees to have an immersive experience and train in real-time for the kinds of scenarios that no hospital security leader wants to face in real life – active shooters, for one. Trainees face and respond to a host of very realistic scenarios and environments that can serve as training enhancement for active shooter response. This kind of training can't be staged, and tools available today are a tremendous advantage.

Artificial Intelligence is shaping up to be a game-changer as well, delivering infinite efficiency benefits in terms of monitoring crowds, identifying threats and identifying specific people of concern. AI works by reading huge volumes of detailed data gathered from cameras and sensors, processing it quickly to uncover issues and delivering insights to security teams who can activate a response.

STRATEGY & STRENGTH IN APPROACHING SECURITY STAFFING

Methodist takes a hybrid approach to security staffing, with both security officers and a cohort of off-duty officers from the Houston Police Department on its regular security team. And, with several locations across the Houston area, Methodist works with Summit Off Duty Services to ensure they always have a solid bench of officers and that critical security posts are always fulfilled.

“Uniformed officers are uniquely effective, especially in sensitive areas of the hospitals, because they bring a different skill set and have authority to intervene and de-escalate challenging situations,” said Sarr. “Outsourcing some of our ODO program is helpful because our provider can pull from a variety of different law enforcement agencies, which would be a lot for us to coordinate. During weather events and all the COVID curveballs, this has been extremely valuable.”

Police officers are highly trained and well-versed in local and state laws. They’re well equipped not only to recognize a threat, but also to know the legal parameters of response and how best to diffuse and de-escalate the situation. They’re able to use that knowledge to prevent or stop the crime, keeping patients, employees and facilities safe and preventing undue attention from media or the potential for future legal action, which could cause long-term reputational damage.

Beyond those unfortunate realities, uniformed officers bring a calming presence to hospitals’ patients, employees and visitors. During a trying time, their very presence—and the knowledge that there is a force behind them—instills a sense of security for everyone at the facility.

Extenuating circumstances call for extenuating preparation. Maintaining a strong security posture means making that investment in tech and having bench strength to ensure all bases are covered.