

THE ROLE OF LOCUM TENENS PROVIDERS IN YOUR STAFFING PLAN

In recent years, the use of temporary (locum tenens) providers has become commonplace among health care facilities nationwide. According to Staff Care's *2015 Survey of Temporary Physician Staffing Trends*, 91% of hospitals, medical groups and other health care facilities used locum tenens physicians sometime in 2014.

Community health centers are no exception to this trend. Health centers commonly use locum tenens primary care physicians as well as psychiatrists, psychologists, dentists, physician assistants and nurse practitioners.

Staff Care's 2015 survey identified the top reasons that health care facilities use locum tenens providers as follows:

1. To fill in until a permanent physician is found.
2. To fill in for staff who have left.
3. To fill in for vacationing providers or for those who are otherwise temporarily absent due to illness, continuing medical education or other reasons.
4. To meet rising patient demand.
5. To fill in during peak usage times.

All of these reasons apply to community health centers that today serve 25 million patients in more than 9,200 sites across the country. According to NACHC data, 95% of health centers have at least one clinical vacancy.

Current turnover rates for primary care physicians now run at about 13% annually, according to the database company SK&A, and virtually all facilities that employ physicians, such as community health centers, must address the issue of provider turnover. Many choose to fill openings caused by turnover with locum tenens providers. Temporary

provider absences due to vacations and other reasons also are a standard staffing challenge that many community health centers choose to address with locum tenens providers. Patient demand for services clearly is rising at many community health centers, which, like other health care facilities, often experience peak usage periods. In Staff Care's experience, health centers do on occasion use locum tenens providers to address rising patient demand and expand services during peak usage periods.

In considering when and how to use locum tenens providers, community health centers should keep several principles in mind, including:

- **Use locum tenens providers strategically.** The use of temporary providers should be part of a larger strategic staffing plan in which patient demand for services and the health center's staffing needs are projected in advance. Ideally, locum tenens providers should be a supplement to permanent staff, not a substitute for permanent personnel.

By projecting staffing needs and understanding when peak usage periods are likely to arise, community health centers can use locum tenens providers when and where they are needed, instead of reacting to staff openings as they arise.

- **Reconsider what it means to be "fully staffed."** Many health care facilities, including health centers, seek to maintain a "full staff," which generally means maintaining a targeted number of providers year-round. Since utilization levels vary throughout the year, it can be more cost-effective to stay flexible, up-staffing and down-staffing as appropriate. Locum tenens providers can be used to build flexibility into community health center staffing targets.



■ **Understand the costs/benefits.** Locum tenens providers, like permanent staff, can represent a significant cost to community health centers. However, by determining revenues likely to be lost due to understaffing, health centers can create an objective measure of the financial benefits locum tenens providers can generate.

In addition, health centers can maximize the financial contribution of locum tenens providers by billing for their services. Staff Care, NACHC's preferred partner for locum tenens staffing, can assist community health centers in setting up the billing process for locum tenens providers.

■ **One size does not fit all.** Locum tenens staffing may not require the highly detailed and often lengthy candidate matching process typical of a permanent search, but it is important to ensure as much as possible that locum tenens providers have the appropriate backgrounds and skill sets typically needed by community health centers. This often includes experience in a broad practice setting seeing all types of patients and experience in rural or urban locations.

Working with staffing agencies, community health centers can help ensure that locum tenens providers have more than just a license in their state but also have the right backgrounds and skills to treat health center patients.

■ **Temp-to-perm is an option, but not a long-term staffing strategy.** It is true that locum tenens providers do on occasion accept permanent positions with community health centers. In such cases, the match can be a long-term one, since both parties have gotten to know each other through the temporary

assignment. However, for the most part, locum tenens providers choose to work on a temporary basis because they enjoy the lifestyle and are not looking for a permanent position. Typically, when a provider goes from temp-to-perm it is the exception, not the rule.

Community health centers therefore should not rely on temp-to-perm as a primary means of filling permanent positions. They should instead engage in the formal process of a permanent physician search, complementing permanent search efforts with the appropriate use of locum tenens providers.

The staffing challenges facing community health centers are likely to become more acute in an era of physician shortages as a growing number of health care facilities seek doctors, dentists and other clinicians. The strategic use of locum tenens, within the context of a comprehensive staffing plan, will be one means by which community health centers can meet their staffing goals. ♦

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About Staff Care

Established in 1992, Staff Care (www.staffcare.com) is proud to be the preferred partner for temporary staffing of the National Association of Community Health Centers and to be sponsor of the national Country Doctor of the Year Award. As a company of AMN Healthcare, Staff Care is part of the most comprehensive health care staffing solutions organization in the nation.