

Service Recovery in Health Care

Embedding Service Recovery Into Everyday Practice



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Hello! This is Carrie Howard, program manager with Stratis Health, with the final session in our 4-part series on Service Recovery in Healthcare. This session describes best practices and processes to consider when building a Service Recovery program and implementation plan.

Objectives

- Discuss best-practices for implementation and embedding service recovery in everyday practice



1



Service recovery is everybody's job. When people complain, they usually address those complaints to front-line staff—but these staff do not necessarily have the skills or the resources to fix "system issues" that are often the source of the problem. Managers and the executive leaders have responsibility for redesigning dysfunctional work processes and systems. This session will discuss best practices and recommendations for embedding service recovery in everyday practice.

Five Foundations for Service Recovery

1. Effective systems for inviting and encouraging customers to complain.
2. Staff skilled in service recovery.
3. Guidelines for staff and latitude to act and atone
4. Clear protocols for handling customer complaints effectively.
5. A documentation and a feedback loop that channels problems revealed through service recovery into an improvement or problem elimination process.



AHRQ's Service Recovery resources define 5 foundational components for Service Recovery:

- Effective systems for inviting/encouraging customers to complain.
- Staff skilled in service recovery: aware of protocols and able to listen non-defensively, empathize, handle emotion, solve problems, and follow through to closure.
- Guidelines for staff and latitude to act and atone.
- Clear protocols for handling customer complaints effectively.
- Documentation and a feedback loop that channels problems revealed through service recovery into an improvement or problem elimination process.

The following best practices and recommendations will help you in each of these 5 areas so that your implementation plan has the solid foundation it needs.

Seek Input From Customers



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3



Complaints can be a useful source of information about the organization and improvements in customer service depend on the organization's ability to elicit and monitor customers' complaints and service failures. It may feel counterintuitive to encourage your customers and patients to complain, but these service failure stories really are the best and fastest route to improving your service in a meaningful way. Remember, Value is determined entirely from the customer's point of view and service recovery cannot take place if we do not know that someone is unhappy.

AHRQ stated that many people would rather "switch than fight," especially in a health care environment, where people fear that complaining could jeopardize the quality of the clinical care they receive and noted that it is very important to understand that minorities and people from underserved communities tend to avoid complaining, even though they may have significant problems with the delivery of care.

So, you must create and promote easy and accessible processes and tools for people to use to submit suggestions and service failure stories and formal

complaints and grievances, including verbal reporting processes that can be accepted and handled by any staff member, especially staff most visible and accessible to the public – your registration and information staff. Share information and resources about your service improvement processes in visible places like your waiting areas, patient care areas, and restrooms and leverage your website and social media platforms. Invite people to share their service failure stories – and then take action! Make sure you respond to each submission as soon as possible after receipt and make changes and improvements as appropriate. For anonymous submissions, consider including a summary of the story or issue and your follow-up and process changes in newsletters or other regular community-facing communications.

Additionally, before you create your Service Recovery Plan, seek input from people while they are well and not experiencing a service failure – not in times of acute illness or distress. Intentionally invite people to participate in focus groups or interviews to seek out service improvement ideas and suggestions. Find out what is important to your customers and incorporate their priorities and ideas into your Service Recovery Plan. These are meant to be intentional focused discussions, separate from a regular clinic visit or a chance meeting at the grocery store or local ball game. Arrange a specific time to discuss this specific topic. Provide a safe environment by minimizing distractions and interruptions and ensuring psychological safety to share true feelings and ideas. Use your 8-Steps to Service Recovery to address any specific incidents or issues raised. Document these discussions well and summarize and aggregate your learnings to identify themes and help prioritize improvement interventions.



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Formal Complaint and Grievance Processes



4



Formal Complaint and Grievance management processes are an important aspect of service recovery. It is expected that even after deploying great Service Recovery, some people may still want to file a formal complaint or grievance and it is their right to do so. Federal regulations state that patients have the right to file a grievance and must be provided with information on who to contact to file a grievance. You have this information posted in your facility and available to patients, but how readily and easily accessible is it? Do your patients read the fine print on your Patient Bill of Rights poster or pamphlet? Are these processes advertised and promoted or overlooked and minimized?

Support and empower your staff by creating guidelines for staff to know if and when to offer the formal complaint or grievance process as an atonement option. With experience, staff may know immediately which situations or patients will end up in the CEO's office. Organizations with good customer service and service recovery programs are proactive and let the CEO, clinic manager, and/or chief medical officer know about these situations right away so that the person can be contacted *before* they have the time to file a formal complaint.

The formal complaint and grievance response process should also follow the 8-steps to service recovery and employ the 10 tips for de-escalation as necessary. Each situation and person is unique and requires an individualized response. Some complaints arise from experiences with a specific person in the service process, which may reflect a training or behavior problem, while others are the result of system problems that require a totally different process to resolve. The tactic of assigning complaint letters received by the CEO to middle managers for resolution, as if they all reflect a one-time event or an employee that needs disciplinary action, is outdated and will never result in permanent solutions to long-term problems. Incorporate specific procedures and data monitoring within your Service Recovery Plan to address formal complaints and grievances at both the individual incident level and system-wide.

Staff Need:

- Clarity about their authority and autonomy to act
- Minimal red tape
- Defined courses of action for most frequent complaints
- A clear system of resources and backup systems
- Time and safe space to learn and practice



Staff members want patients to feel good about their care experiences. It gives staff members pride to know they're meeting patient expectations and makes their own workdays easier. With the service recovery process, healthcare leaders play a direct role in supporting staff by giving staff members the skills and autonomy to resolve problems well. Leaders can and should give their staff the education training and resources they need to resolve issues at the front line. Having greater autonomy to correct concerns at the points where they occur allows staff to engage with patients as human beings and create a more meaningful interaction with them. Genuine moments of connection happen when staff members reach past their task-based roles to these authentic personal interactions. Autonomy also allows staff members to exercise creative problem-solving and critical thinking, which helps them feel more invested in the service-recovery outcome.

AHRQ provides Guidelines for Staff and Latitude To Act and Atone:

Staff need to have the authority to make decisions about handling complaints autonomously so they can act quickly. Specifically, they need:

- Clarity that taking action is an expectation and the extent of their authority to act on complaints without getting approval from managers;

- Minimal red tape – taking action needs to be easy and encouraged
- Defined courses of actions for most frequent complaints. – your data will show you which situations arise most often and where, so it is important to both practice and plan for those situations AND intentionally improve processes or systems to reduce or prevent those incidents
- A clear system of resources, including other staff and leaders, clear authority lines, and backup systems for dealing with difficult situations or those with financial, legal, or ethical implications. Include parameters for if/when to escalate a situation to your direct manager or supervisor and/or other organizational leader.
- Time to learn. practice, and reflect upon or debrief experiences in safe settings

Create a Service Recovery Plan



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6



Good service recovery programs go beyond the "quick fix." They include a process for tracking problems and complaints to help identify the source of the problem so the right improvement can be put into place. It is important to create and implement a service excellence or recovery plan, similar to your Quality, Infection Control, and Emergency Preparedness plans. This plan is meant to serve as a living, guiding document for your service program and activities. Include the why, what, how, when, and who – connect the plan to your strategic plan and your quality improvement and patient safety programs. Integrate Service Recovery and experience as a core value in your organization – not as this year’s project or priority – but one of the foundational pillars of your success.

Key Components of a Service Recovery Plan include:

- Engagement of frontline staff – create investment and ownership by involving staff in the process
- Set clear expectation that EVERYONE is responsible for service recovery – You may have heard this once or twice throughout this series, but it is crucial to clearly set and communicate this expectation. You can’t hold someone accountable to an expectation that you have not clearly communicated or that you assume is an “understood unwritten rule”. Make it official and write it down! Revise policy language as necessary. Create

posters and visual reminders, provide initial and ongoing education, and talk about it every chance you get so that no one can tell you that they didn't know or understand what was expected of them.

- Create standardized processes, particularly for incident documentation and closed-loop follow-up and response processes
- Create and practice scripted language – this is a key tool that all people new to these skills appreciate. Beginning with scripted responses will help you ensure consistent responses and will help your staff feel confident in real time. Remember, include your list of “NEVER say” scripting as well!
- Ensure easy access to supporting resources – training, tools, and supporting resource such as the service recovery plan itself are only as good as their ease of accessibility, especially at the beginning of training and implementation. Make your toolkit and resources available electronically and as hard copies in specified locations throughout the building. Again, using visual cues can be helpful – encourage staff to post a list of 8-steps to service recovery near their desks for easy reference.
- Create a process to record, track, and trend service recovery situations and outcomes – as with your quality or infection control plan, include specifics on how you will report and analyze service failure data. Include the frequency of reporting to your governing board and how you will share data and progress with your frontline staff and your patients.

Implement Your Service Recovery Plan

- Communicate the plan
- Train staff
- PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!
- Observe and coach
- Share specific stories and overall data



7



As with any improvement effort, it is much easier to make the technical changes to processes and policies than it is to change people's behavior. Adaptive changes, or behavioral changes to long-standing habits or comfort zones, are the among the most difficult changes you'll ever face. This does NOT happen overnight. This is an ongoing cycle of communication, training, practice, coaching, and reflecting on experiences including specific stories and the organizations overall story through data. To truly integrate changes to behavior and organizational culture, like service recovery, experts estimate it takes at least 3 years to fully embed the behavior so that it becomes the new normal "way we do things here".

You will need patience and commitment to help staff learn, understand, and practice how to consistently:

- anticipate needs –
- display active listening skills –
- understand what alternatives they can offer
- learn how to make amends
- And more

Summary

- Service recovery matters in the health care setting
- Service recovery is the responsibility of all staff
- There are step-by-step approaches to recognize, address, and de-escalate problems in real time
- Service recovery needs to be embedded in everyday practice



In summary, service recovery matters in healthcare, it is the responsibility of all staff, and it needs to be embedded in everyday practice. Consistently providing excellent service is necessary and will improve patient and staff experience, your organizational culture and reputation, and your bottom line.

Remember, the “Grapevine Effect” also applies to positive experiences. People excitedly share amazing service recovery stories far and wide!!! Make sure your story and reputation is one of excellence! We need to acknowledge and act to correct the things don’t go as expected. We must each do our part to foster a culture of caring. It’s simply the right thing to do.

Thank you for your time and effort to ensure excellent service in our healthcare settings!