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Creating Your Assessment: Policies Are Only Part of It

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Lately, I have been getting similar questions from various departments, “once we have our policies completed, we are ready for our assessment, right?” The answer is “no.” Completing your policies is part of the accreditation equation, but in order to be ready for your on-site assessment, there is much more to do.

First, even though your policies are drafted, you will need to scrutinize each and every one of them and compare your policy to the language contained in the accreditation standards. Remember, “every word matters.” You must be very careful when reviewing and comparing the accreditation standards to your policy language, standards that contain “employees” as opposed to “sworn officers” are standards that trip up many Accreditation Managers. Additionally, as an Accreditation Manager you need to pay close attention to the time sensitive standards and ensure that the language in your policy meets the timeliness requirements in the accreditation standard.

Again, policies are only part of the accreditation equation. You must create the assessment. “What’s that you ask?” Allow me to explain.

You will need to obtain the manual from your accrediting body. You may get the standards manual from your accrediting body directly, or you may be able to download it from a web-based service such as PowerDMS. As the Accreditation Manager you must ensure that you have the most up-to-date manual. Each accrediting body updates their manual from time to time and, as the Accreditation Manager, it is your responsibility to base your assessment on the current accreditation manual.

Now that you have the current accreditation manual, you need to start building your assessment. First you need to name your assessment. To make your assessment clear, it is best to name your assessment with the dates of your assessment, month and year are sufficient (i.e., CALEA January 2019 – December 2022). Not only does this help you stay organized, but it will also indicate to the assessors the starting and ending dates of your assessment.

The next step is to link the individual policy to the accreditation standard. Again, this is based on a web-based service such as PowerDMS. Of course, linking the policy to the standard could also be accomplished using paper files by printing out a copy of the policy and placing it into a file folder with the standard. Using a web-based service you will either link or upload the relevant policy into the accreditation standard.

After you have the policy linked, you begin to get into the finite details of your accreditation equation. For each applicable accreditation standard, you will need to link and highlight (either digitally or via print and highlighting) the applicable language to the appropriate accreditation language. This is a crucial detail. It is paramount that you highlight the exact language that you want the assessor to read – nothing more, nothing less. The process of highlighting and linking the standards is a time-consuming process, but crucial to your accreditation. If you are using a service such as PowerDMS, taking your time here will pay dividends as you will be able to transfer this information into future assessments.

The highlighting process requires you to link every accreditation component, including each individual bullet in the bulleted standards to the relevant language. It is imperative that you direct the assessor(s) to exactly what you want them to read. As the Accreditation Manager you want to make the assessors' job easy, the assessors should not struggle to find the applicable language. Remember, the assessors will be looking for hundreds, possibly even thousands of individual points of compliance over the course of an assessment. Make their job as easy as possible.

Using a digital platform, you should also use the comment section of the highlight to explain the highlight. While it may seem redundant, anything that you can do to direct the assessor's attention to what you want them to see will be appreciated. Also keep in mind that you are creating the assessment, not for you, but for individuals who are not familiar with your agency. Therefore, you should use every opportunity through the software to explain what you are doing and/or what a highlight or document means to the accreditation.

All of this "accreditation infrastructure" is necessary before you start gathering proofs. While you don't need to build the entire assessment before gathering a single proof, it is helpful to complete the linking and highlighting for each standard before you add proofs as it will likely help guide you to the best proofs.

So, although you are completing your policies, you need to keep in mind that policies are only part of our accreditation equation. As you prepare for your first virtual or on-site assessment you need to be sure that you allot enough time for building the assessment, including linking the policies and highlighting the applicable language.