

Developing Safety Mindfulness in Staff: Reducing Adverse Incidents in a Behavioral Health Care Organization

By *Vinfen Corporation, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Winner: President's Award, 2003 Negley Awards for Excellence in Risk Management

Vinfen has created a Risk Management program that increases staff mindfulness and reduces the frequency of adverse events. This application for the 2003 Negley Award describes Vinfen's extensive risk management activities for its programs and discusses the applicability of Vinfen's process and experience in risk management to the rest of the industry. While we engage in strategic planning and goal setting, as do most human service organizations, we also have a process to create a collective state of "mindfulness" that produces an enhanced ability to discover and correct errors before they escalate into a crisis.

We face an alarming range of serious adverse events that typically occur in behavioral health programs. They include staff injuries, medication errors resulting in injury, motor vehicle accidents, assault, self-injury and suicide by persons served, fires, medical crises, and illegal activities on the part of staff or persons served. As these risks increase in the behavioral health industry, there is clearly a need to increase mindfulness in the organization. Programs must serve consumers with more challenging needs at a time when resources are decreasing. Recruiting, training, and retaining staff with the skills needed to safely operate these high intensity programs is an unprecedented challenge. Managed care companies and state agencies have successfully shifted both financial and clinical risk to providers. As a result, service providers carry greater risk of liability associated with adverse events.

Vinfen's Risk Management Program

The mission of Vinfen's risk Management Program is to "ensure that bad things do not happen to our consumers, our employees, our community, or our company." To achieve this, Vinfen has developed a process to identify and examine adverse events without blame or prejudice in an effort to develop systematic approaches to reduce risk. Vinfen's Risk Management Program (a) collects information about adverse events (or the risk of adverse events), (b) convenes a Risk Management Committee who analyze and act on information to reduce the risk of reported events from either recurring or becoming more serious and (c) employs a workplace safety program to increase employee mindfulness for client safety as well as their own.

Collecting Information on Adverse Events:

Central to Vinfen's system of collecting information is a detailed process of reporting adverse events in each of Vinfen's 215 program sites. While collecting information in a large and decentralized system like Vinfen is challenging, it is important that all programs report adverse events in a standardized and systematic format. To accomplish this, Vinfen has developed systems to increase the timeliness and completeness of reporting.

Vinfen established the Quality Department as the single point of responsibility for maintaining all records of adverse events to track trends across the organization and assure the integrity of the reports. When Vinfen first began to collect risk data, we asked programs to forward copies of all incident reports and medication occurrence reports by the tenth of the month with the risk report forms. The Quality Department reviewed all risk report forms and supplementary material. If the reports were missing attachments, or if the number of incident reports submitted did not correspond to the number of incident reports referenced in the risk report, the Quality Department contacted the Program to reconcile the variance.

We now employ our organization-wide computer network that strengthens our reporting system. On the first of each month, the quality Management Department e-mails risk reporting

forms (#A) to each program in Vinfen. We have discovered that e-mailing forms each month increases the return rate because it reminds programs to complete the form and reinforces the importance that management places on this process. We e-mail reminders to programs that have not completed the forms. Reports from the compiled data are generated each month and distributed to Vinfen's risk Committee at the end of the month. When Vinfen began this risk reporting process in 1998, less than two-thirds of programs completed and submitted the forms on time. In October 2002, more than 98% of Programs completed and submitted all required forms on time.

Vinfen has discovered that managers are much more likely to submit data when the submission of data results in useful reports returned to them. Vinfen scrupulously generates a wide range of reports sent to programs based on the data that they have sent. Monthly reports are created for the Risk Committee providing detail about the month's adverse events. A "highlights report" is produced for the Executive Committee, all programs and the Board of Directors and provides an analytical overview of the quarter's performance in risk management. Annually, a detailed analytical summary of the year's events is prepared. This report is distributed to all programs, the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, and used in Vinfen's CARF Management Report (#B). Reports are intentionally simple to read, relying on graphical presentation, giving programs an opportunity to track trends. Vinfen has established its own benchmarks for most adverse incidents, which allow programs to assess their performance against benchmarks.

Vinfen is required by its state regulators to file critical incident reports with them on their forms within 24 hours. These critical incidents include any instances of assault, self-harm, abuse or neglect, fire, significant property destructions, indecent behavior, and missing persons. Critical incidents are faxed within 24 hours of the event to the Quality Department where they are individually reviewed by a Quality Manager and Vinfen's Medical Director. All significant medication errors, including those that require medical intervention, are reported by fax within 24 hours to the Medical Director.

Investigations of adverse events provide an additional source of information. All allegations of abuse, neglect, or human rights violations trigger investigations. Significant risk related trends are investigated. In the spring of 2002, a smoking related fire occurred in one of Vinfen's supported housing programs. Vinfen conducted an investigation that examined the event, and smoking related risk areas throughout the organization. As a result of the investigation several recommendations were made by the Risk Management Committee including making fire safe mattresses available to those programs that provide service to consumers who exhibit high-risk smoking practices (#C). Vinfen takes these investigations seriously and conducts approximately 60 internal investigations per year. These investigations are essential in Vinfen's effort to understand without blame or prejudice the details of adverse events or risk related trends occurring in the company and act appropriately in response to this understanding. The Quality Department assigns all investigations to senior Vinfen staff. The Quality Department tracks and manages the review process. The Director of Quality, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Counsel, and Medical Director review copies of the reports within 48 hours of completion. The quality Department provides summaries of all investigations to the Vinfen's risk Committee. The investigation process in conjunction with the reporting process on adverse events provides a rich and vital base of information to the risk Committee in its efforts to understand and reduce risk at Vinfen.

Reports on adverse events are not limited to incidents related to clients. The appropriate department provides reports on all accidents involving company vehicles and work related employee injury data to the Department who incorporates the data into Vinfen's risk Data Base. The Quality Director reviews final reports of all data for accuracy.

Taking Action – Risk Management Committee:

Vinfen's Risk Management Committee is responsible for analyzing reports, identifying trends and reviewing the results of investigations. They make decisions regarding the remedies for adverse incidents, as well as the steps to prevent problems in the future. The Committee is co-chaired by Vinfen's director of Quality and Director of Risk Management. The Committee is comprised of ten senior staff from Vinfen including the Chief Operating Officer, Medical Director, Service Division Heads, Clinical and Nursing Directors, Director of Facilities and Director of Purchasing (#D). The Risk Committee takes action company-wide that includes changing policy in response to even a single event if the Committee believes that the changes will reduce the risk of the event occurring again. The Committee requests investigations designed to change procedures that will prevent adverse events from occurring again. As we know, the best predictor of a significant adverse event is the frequency of minor and overlooked events. If the Committee observes a trend related to adverse events, it takes whatever steps it need to investigate and act to reduce risk. The Committee has the authority to take whatever action it needs, including making significant expenditures of organization time, energy, and cash. Given the makeup of the Committee, Risk Management Committee meetings are expensive undertakings. However, Vinfen has discovered that it is worth the cost to have all of the key members of the organization who are needed to make major organizational decisions around the table at the same time. The Committee can, at a regular or special committee meeting, take immediate, necessary action to reduce risk.

In 2001 Vinfen's Risk Committee decided to review all incidents and medication occurrences within 24 hours of the event. In 2002 they added review of restraint reports within 24 hours. Programs now e-mail or fax the incident report, medication occurrence report, or restraint report to one of three e-mail addresses maintained by the quality Department. A Quality Manager reviews the report and forwards it to the divisional VP, Medical Director, Director of Nursing, and Clinical Director as applicable. This process better assures prompt identification and organizational response to adverse events that pose significant liability concerns.

Vinfen's V-Safe Program

Vinfen began a major initiative to improve workplace safety for its 1600 employees at the end of 1999. Along with committing staff resources to oversee workplace safety, improvements to physical sites and employee training, we understood the importance of increasing employee awareness of safety. After an analysis of our data, we found many of our injuries were not a result of unsafe conditions, but unsafe behavior of our employees. Employees often were rushing around, taking short cuts, and not being "mindful" of their own safety.

We designed a low cost, easy to implement safety incentive program aimed at increasing employee safety awareness. Any organization would be able to develop and implement a similar incentive program to match their specific needs. Despite the decentralized nature of our organization with 215 sites throughout eastern Massachusetts and Northern Connecticut, we were able to develop a system that involved all employees in or safety program. Our major focus was to develop a program to keep safety in the forefront of employees' minds and ensure that reporting of all incidents is maintained. We did not want to inadvertently support a culture of underreporting workplace accidents. Instead of just measuring and rewarding workdays free from accidents, we designed a program that rewards creative, useful safety suggestions, attendance at safety training, random raffles, safety quizzes testing employee knowledge of policies and general safety facts, and annual safety awards. This approach keeps the safety program fresh and provides all employees multiple opportunities to participate in the safety program.

We sponsor two safety related events each month. Winners receive movie tickets, video store gift cards, V-Safe items like T-shirts, first aid kits and flashlights. These low-cost items are well received by employees. We also communicate the names of winners throughout the organization on a monthly basis to recognize these individuals, and to continually highlight our

safety program throughout the company (#E). In addition to the incentive program, we send out e-mail messages on a regular basis on general safety, recall notices, or monthly safety topics.

Our V-Safe program has proven to be successful at increasing safety awareness and is an effective process to keep employees “mindful” of workplace safety. Each quarter, employees make over 100 entries to the safety quiz, a proven tool for getting employees to discuss and debate safety issues within the programs and during staff meetings. Since the inception of the V-Safe program in June of 2000, we have awarded over 425 safety awards. The healthy competition has added fun to the V-Safe program and discussions of employee safety occur throughout the company at a much greater frequency. The program actively engages employees to consider their own safety and the safety of others throughout the day.

Results of the Process: Vinfen has ample evidence that its Risk Management program is successful.

First, Vinfen has seen observable improvement in client care and decreases in negative indicators:

- During the past three years serious medication errors have been reduced by 65%.
- From FY-2001 to FY-2002, injuries to clients decreased 27%.
- In the past three years overall client satisfaction has increased: from 2.75 in FY-2001 to 3.87 in FY-2003. (1.0 most dissatisfied to 5.0 most satisfied).
- From 1998 to 2002 Workers Compensation reports as result of on the job injuries have decreased by 54%.
- From 1999 to 2002 lost time claims due to work related injuries has been reduced by 57%.
- From 2000 to 2002 our work related injury incidence rate (number of total cases per 100 employees) has dropped from 9.1 to 3.5.
- From 1999 to 2002 the number of injury reports a year decreased from 154 to 86.
- During the past two years, company vehicle accidents have been reduced by 17%.

Second, we have evidence that staff have embraced these processes and developed safety “mindfulness.” As noted earlier, risk reporting is no longer seen as a chore, but as a valuable and routine part of a manager’s job.

- The number of late adverse incident reports has decreased from 40% in 1998 to less than 5% in 2002.
- Senior managers have taken the responsibility for all investigations completed in the organization.
- In 2002 more than one-third of 215 program sites were working on safety related goals.
- Staff submit entries to quarterly “Safety Quizzes,” averaging more than 100 entries per quiz.

Third, Vinfen policies and procedures have been developed in response to lessons from Vinfen’s information gathering about and analysis of adverse events (#F).

- Development of a comprehensive safety policy and procedure manual for all sites with regular updates.
- Environmental emergencies policies covering Fire, Heat, and Natural Disasters.
- Safe driving policies, including remedial driver training for employees identified as unsafe drivers.
- Development and implementation of safety rules
- Incident reporting procedures.

Fourth, we believe that Vinfen's Risk Processes represent exemplary practice with regard to professional standards of care. As noted in Vinfen's 2001 CARF Accreditation Survey report, we make "an exceptional commitment to the management of data related to incident reports." The most important beneficiaries of the success of Vinfen's Risk Processes are the consumers served by Vinfen.

- The Committee identifies training opportunities for staff to maintain safer environments, such as our Medication Administration Program Supervisor Training that teaches supervisors how to increase skills in medication administration and decrease errors.
- Program staff provide the Committee with safety suggestions that allows for proactive responses to potential risk areas.
- A safety policy and procedure manual provides standardized procedures and training materials for all staff and consumers.

Relevance of Vinfen's Activities to the Industry

We believe that Vinfen's risk processes can serve as a model for the industry. Vinfen's approach is relatively "low-tech" and uses tools available to all providers. Our data collection systems are based in commonly available and affordable software applications such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Access and e-mail. Existing staff, as a part of their regular duties, complete most of the work for these processes. Internal senior managers conduct investigations. Reporting is done by internal Vinfen staff and distributed internally in Vinfen. No part of the process involves staff, activities, or tools that would not routinely be found in most provider organizations. Vinfen believes that the most important reason for the success of this program is that Vinfen management has made a commitment to making it a success. Any organization that decides to take Risk Management seriously can develop similar policies, procedures, and processes. Most of the success of the program comes from patience and persistence in building the program over time with effective execution.

Summary

Vinfen's Risk Management Program seeks to create "mindfulness" throughout the organization through a comprehensive approach that makes all staff stakeholders create a safe environment for our consumers. While the mission of our risk management program is to "ensure that bad things do not happen to our consumers, our employees, our community or our company," we believe that such an approach improves our programs, sharpens all our staff's skills and enhances the services we provide. We have employed the technologies we have at hand like e-mail available to all programs throughout a widely dispersed organization. Many behavioral health care organizations have such technology that they can easily employ with the off the shelf software. More importantly, we have engaged both management and staff in a mutually cooperative system of reporting, analyzing, providing feedback and constructive action. By paying attention both the adverse incidents as they happen and to trends of incidents that are easily ignored or overlooked, we attempt to take steps that will prevent a more serious incident in the future. By doing so, we avoid costly risk and we serve our consumers better.

Overview: Vinfen provides a wide range of services for adults and children including outpatient services, emergency services, day and vocational programs, an extensive array of residential options, HIV services, nursing home services, substance abuse services, etc. Approximately 40% of Vinfen's revenue is derived from services for individuals with mental retardation and developmental disabilities while 60% comes from services for people with mental illnesses. Vinfen has an annual budget of approximately \$73 million and employs 1600 staff. CEO is Gary Lamson. Quality Management Director is Madeline Becker. Phone 617-441-1800.