Five Strategies for Stronger HIPAA Compliance

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy and security rules have been around for more than 20 years, and yet organizations still struggle to comply with the multifaceted standard. Closely reviewing your current approach to HIPAA privacy and security compliance and making sure it fully meets the standard's various requirements is critical to keeping patients' protected health information (PHI) private and to lowering an organization's risk and liability.

DID YOU KNOW? | There are more than 25,000 HIPAA complaints each year,[1] and 70% of investigated cases found a violation.[2]

Here are five things you need to know to get your HIPAA compliance program on track:

Offer comprehensive and accessible staff training. HIPAA compliance problems often stem from a lack of staff awareness of privacy rules or carelessness when handling all PHI, including electronic protected health information (ePHI). Organizations must offer new hire and annual refresher training that outline the regulations and provide best practices for maintaining information confidentiality and cybersecurity. Online training modules can be beneficial here. Not only can staff access the tools at their convenience, but the system can document training completion to fully demonstrate compliance.

Make sure your policies and procedures are up to date. Organizations should have a detailed HIPAA compliance program and regularly review it—ideally every year. Topics to cover include how and when an organization assesses information privacy and security risks; the measures in place to protect sensitive health information; and what happens in the event of a breach. Verbal, electronic and paper-based communications should be addressed.

See more strategies »

We protect what matters.

Stericycle®

Have strategies for addressing cybersecurity threats. Robust security and encryption software are critical for protecting electronic devices. In addition, staff should know how to recognize and avoid threats when they arrive via email, including phishing emails, ransomware and malware. Staff education should evolve and change quickly as new cyber threats arise.

Define medical record request procedures. Medical requests happen frequently, and staff should know how to address them. Typically, healthcare organizations do not charge patients when they make a request or charge them a nominal HIPAA fee. They may still choose to charge the appropriate state record copy fee to third parties such as attorneys, or any other requesting party that is required to present patient authorization. It is essential to make sure any patient record copy fees are properly charged, meeting applicable HIPAA requirements. It's also crucial not to prevent easy patient access to medical information.

Know what to do if there is an investigation. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) investigates HIPAA violations if it receives a patient complaint, a healthcare organization reports a breach or the agency notices something that causes concern. Depending on the nature of the complaint, the OCR may send a demand letter requiring HIPAA policies and procedures, among many other documents or they may schedule an onsite visit and review. The best way to prepare for an OCR investigation is to have current HIPAA policies readily available, current security and privacy risk analysis, as well as robust, well-documented staff training. It is also important to implement effective security controls and mitigation solutions, such as cybersecurity detection and monitoring systems, all of which lessen the likelihood of a HIPAA breach occurring.

For more information on how Stericycle can help you remain in compliance with HIPAA's different regulations, visit **Stericycle.com/HIPAA**.

DID YOU KNOW?

The number of HIPAA penalties is almost double what it was five years ago, and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) received $28,683,400 in financial penalties in 2018.[3]

Sources:
1. https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/compliance-enforcement/data/complaints-received-by-calendar-year/index.html
2. https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/compliance-enforcement/data/numbers-glance/index.html
3. https://www.hipaajournal.com/summary-2018-hipaa-fines-and-settlements/

We protect what matters.

Stericycle®