

Facility Email Protection

The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (IDIA) has announced it intends to begin using email for official communications with facilities in the new year. As email becomes a more common method of facility communication, security and privacy protection need to be considered. Oftentimes, email is used to conduct facility business, whether this means communicating with IDIA, working with consultants and/or business associates, or corresponding with physicians and family members. It is appropriate to review the setup of the email accounts you and your staff are using and to examine the options that are available.

QUESTIONS to help review your facility's email setup and practices:

- Does the facility “own” the email communication? If an employee uses a personal email account to correspond on behalf of the facility, you have little control over the communication although you are ultimately responsible for it. Are you confident that resident information is protected? Do you have the ability to monitor the email? If an employee leaves the facility, how do you retain his/her contacts and prior communications?
- Are you getting by with one general facility email address? Funneling all communications through one address can make it difficult to keep messages confidential, control access, and direct messages to the intended staff.
- Are you using a free email service such as AOL, Yahoo, or Google offer? These options are free because of their sponsorship by advertisers. Some free email providers scan the content of messages in order to customize the ads you see, and some include chatting and news or other links to Internet sources. These may be handy options for personal use but detrimental to facility business practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS that will help you avoid the common pitfalls:

- Provide business email accounts for key staff members and each department.
- You may dress them up by obtaining your domain name for the accounts. This increases the professionalism of your contact information and can also make the addresses easier for contacts to remember.
- Develop policies and procedures that define your expectations for your business accounts, i.e., checking messages at least daily, allowance (or not) of personal use of the accounts, compliance with HIPAA protections, facility monitoring of emails, and use of a facility-specific “signature” that includes identifying and protective language.
- Eliminate distractions and risks by obtaining secure email from professional providers.
- Maintain facility “ownership” of the accounts with the ability to monitor the emails and change security settings when staff leave employment with the facility.

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TIPS to increase your protection, particularly when emails contain resident-specific information:

- Protect documents sent as email attachments by putting them into PDF format with password protection and encryption. PrimoPDF offers a free PDF writer at www.PrimoPDF.com. Version 3.2 has both password and encryption options.
- If you password-protect a document, send the password in a follow-up email. Or establish a standard password for documents sent to a particular party such as a consultant.
- Encrypt the email itself. This is a service offered by some email providers and may require the recipient to have the same provider in order to decrypt the message.

Email is convenient, efficient, and is rapidly becoming a standard means of communication. You can equip your facility to use it to its fullest advantage while protecting the facility's interests and residents' privacy.

A trusted source of specialized long-term care software and IT services for nearly twenty years, Creative Solutions Unlimited, Inc. provides long-term care facilities and other organizations with secure email accounts through its iStop® Web Design Services. The accounts may incorporate either personnel or department names and the facility domain name, addresses that stay the same regardless of any change in Internet service provider. The facility retains control of passwords and may purchase additional storage space if necessary. Web mail offered by CSU may be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection.

For information about CSU's email and web services, contact Jim Davies at 800.253.7697, Ext. 113 or jdavies@csumail.com.

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