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233 N. Michigan Ave., 21st Fl.
Chicago, IL 60601

phone >>(312) 233-1100
fax >>(312) 233-1090
web >>www.ahima.org

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For more information, contact:

Lauren Kotarski
Public Communications Inc.
Newsroom: 213-743-6261
Office: 312-558-1770
lkotarski@pcipr.com

HIM Response to an Emergency Situation

HIM professional shares experience, provides tips to prepare for crisis incidents

LOS ANGELES – Oct. 10, 2017 – Almost six years after an active shooter walked into the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center where Sally Lucci, RHIA, CCA, was the Health Information Management (HIM) Director—she is still haunted by it.

In her presentation, “HIM Response to an Active Shooter Incident” today at the [American Health Information Management Association \(AHIMA\) 89th Annual Convention & Exhibit](#), Lucci, now the program director for the health informatics and information management program at West Virginia University, shared her experience and provided guidance for other HIM professionals to prepare themselves should they be in a similar crisis situation.

“It’s difficult to talk about; an active shooter incident changes those involved. That is why it’s important to have this dialogue, because it’s our responsibility to be prepared to manage that change,” Lucci said. “As HIM professionals, we must be prepared to respond to a rapidly evolving situation even when we, our staff and peers may be emotionally traumatized. In the days following an incident, there will be requests for patient health records from law enforcement and media, and HIM professionals will need to be prepared to handle these requests while remaining compliant with privacy rules.”

Sharing examples of the privacy, confidentiality and security concerns she and her staff experienced following the incident, Lucci said HIM professionals should examine their policies now, making sure they are compliant and there are specific steps and protocols in place that can be easily followed.

“Effects of trauma on a person include anxiety as well as difficulty in concentrating and making decisions, which is why it’s important to provide emotional support to coworkers and to have

release of medical information policies and procedures in place for all situations before they happen,” Lucci said.

Warning that there will be misinformation following a traumatic incident and that breaches of information are likely, Lucci said an organization’s policies and procedures should follow the [AHIMA Code of Ethics](#).

“HIM professionals stand at the forefront of ensuring patient health information is accurate, private and secure,” said AHIMA interim CEO Pamela Lane, MS, RHIA. “By coming together and sharing our experiences and wisdom, we’re giving all HIM professionals the tools they need to protect the integrity of health information while making it accessible to the appropriate people.”

Lucci said that HIM policy guidelines, as outlined in the AHIMA code of ethics, should:

- Protect the confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service.
- Disclose only information that is directly relevant or necessary to achieve the purpose of disclosure.
- Release information only with valid authorization from a patient or a person legally authorized to consent on behalf of a patient or as authorized by federal or state regulations. The minimum necessary standard is essential when releasing health information for disclosure activities.
- Promote the obligation to respect privacy by respecting confidential information shared among colleagues, while responding to requests from the legal profession, the media, or other non-healthcare related individuals.
- Safeguard the privacy and security of written and electronic health information and other sensitive information.
- Take reasonable steps to ensure that health information is stored securely and that patients' data is not available to others who are not authorized to have access.
- Prevent inappropriate disclosure of individually identifiable information.

In addition to creating guidelines that meet legal and ethical standards for the privacy of health information, HIM professionals should work with their organization’s risk management, public relations, human resources and leadership team to ensure consistency and mutual understanding of steps to be taken should an event occur.

Lucci’s presentation is one of several addressing privacy and security issues in HIM. For details on additional presentations on this topic and others, visit the [educational tracks page](#) of the AHIMA Convention & Exhibit website.

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About AHIMA

The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) represents more than 103,000 health information professionals in the United States and around the world. AHIMA is committed to promoting and advocating for best practices and effective standards in health information and to actively contributing to the development and advancement of health information professionals worldwide. AHIMA is advancing informatics, data analytics, and information governance to achieve the goal of providing expertise to ensure trusted information for healthcare. www.ahima.org