

● **Leading by Example: Providence Health & Services Tobacco-Free Hiring Policy**

Case Study: Providence Health & Services Alaska

- Tobacco Free Campus Policy + Enforcement
- Ask, Advise, Refer
- Documentation + Electronic Health Records (EHR)
- Billing + Reimbursement Strategies
- Use of Alaska's Tobacco Quit Line
- Quit Medication
- Emerging practices: tobacco-free hiring policy

Introduction

Providence Health & Services is the sixth largest faith-based health system in the United States, operating in Alaska, California, Montana, Oregon, and Washington with over 70,000 employees. In Alaska, Providence serves eight communities: Anchorage, Cordova, Eagle River, Kodiak Island, Mat-Su, Seward, Soldotna and Valdez. Providence Health & Services is Alaska's largest private employer with over 4,000 employees.

Providence Alaska Tobacco-free Policy Timeline

2006

Providence becomes the first health center campus in Alaska to become tobacco free!

2007 to 2010

Broad-based education about the importance of a tobacco free staff occurs.

2010-2011

Key leadership (CEO/HR Chief) on board.

Summer 2011

On-line application tool updated and tested.

Summer to Fall 2011

Communications plan developed and commenced.

November 17, 2011

Tobacco-free hiring policy launch!

As the largest private employer in the state and a well-respected health organization in the community, Providence Alaska plays an influential role as a leader and innovator. Providence has used its stature to promote community health and employee well-being. One of the pillars of Providence's well-being initiatives is its strong, visionary policy to hire only tobacco-free employees, first implemented in November 2011. With this policy Providence seeks to improve the health of its employees, decrease healthcare costs to the organization, model good health behaviors to patients, and communicate that Providence lives its mission to improve the well-being of the communities they serve through compassionate healthcare delivered by healthy employees.

A Comprehensive Approach

Addressing tobacco use and its consequences requires a comprehensive approach, and Providence's tobacco no-hire policy is one piece of a multi-faceted program. In a healthcare setting, this approach includes several key elements:

- A tobacco-free campus policy that applies to patients, visitors and staff with effective enforcement.
- Ask, advise, refer (AAR) in which healthcare providers screen all clients for current tobacco use, advise them to quit, and refer them to cessation resources, provided in-house or through other sources.
- Consistent use of an Electronic Health Record to ensure that patient tobacco use is tracked at every visit and provider services are easily documented.
- Encouragement of staff to quit using tobacco by ensuring health insurance plans include a benefit for quitting tobacco.

Champion Of Change

Providence Alaska implemented the tobacco no-hire policy on November 17, 2011, coinciding with the American Cancer Society's Great American Smokeout Day. The road to this milestone, however, was long. Providence's tobacco-free hiring policy was years in the making, and

its existence can largely be attributed to the actions of an important leader on Providence staff. Tammy Green, a passionate advocate for innovative approaches to workplace well-being, guided this policy through development, enactment and implementation. Tammy joined Providence Alaska in 2007 as regional director of health management services. She brought with her a distinguished career in public health, including previous work with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. Her background and education gave her a keen understanding of the ways in which population-level policies inspire individual behavior change.

Just before Tammy arrived, Providence had become the first health organization in Alaska to make their campus tobacco free (2006). Tammy sought to build on the success and momentum of the tobacco-free campus policy and pursue additional policies as part of a comprehensive strategy to promote community and employee health. Tammy saw the opportunity from two vantage points: Providence as a well-respected healthcare provider in Alaska, and Providence as a self-insured health plan provider to their large employee base. She was in a unique position to consider how to make a direct impact on costs, improve employee health and influence positive change in the community.

Building Support Within

Working in public health taught Tammy that any policy change first requires broad-based education about the importance of the policy change, the problems it would address and the benefits the policy would bring, as well as any potential challenges it might pose. Tammy started broadly by using every opportunity she had to talk with her peer leaders and other organizations with whom she worked about the importance of promoting health through methods like tobacco-free policies. She consistently presented the case for interventions such as a tobacco-free hiring policy, and how it was fully aligned with Providence's health mission. She also worked closely with the staff she managed, many of whom were on-the-ground providers at Providence, to educate them about why the policy was important and to answer their concerns.

In addition to educating leaders and staff, she strategically sought out champions in leadership positions who could help carry the message to the rest of the organization. She successfully garnered the strong support of Providence's CEO and Chief Human Resource Officer. Tammy sought to achieve universal consensus among Providence Alaska leadership. She had the foresight to understand that the entire decision making board must be "all in," or there would be potential for leaders to later seek exemptions from the policy and undermine its overall efficacy.

***"If not us
[Providence],
then who?"***

***"We believe that by
moving to a policy
of not hiring tobacco
users, we send a very
clear message to the
community that we are
not only the leaders in
healthcare, but we're
really the leaders in
health."***

- Tammy Green

Director, Well-being &
Absence Management

The Right Message

Once leadership and key staff support was in place and the decision was made to adopt the hiring policy, the next step was to develop an internal and external communication strategy to inform current employees and people outside of Providence about the policy. The key message to current employees focused on Providence's commitment to employee and patient health, and the staff's ability to model healthy behavior to patients. The policy did not affect existing employees, but they were reminded of the benefits of free quit resources available to them as Providence employees. The internal communications effort allowed plenty of time to address concerns with staff and make certain the Providence community was ready to move forward with the hiring policy.

Employee Perspective

Soon after the tobacco-free hiring policy was passed Tammy found herself in an elevator at Providence Hospital in Anchorage with a longtime fellow employee who identified as a former smoker. She thanked Tammy for her work to enact the policy, expressing that it was a "great thing" that tobacco use was being addressed. The employee recalled when the elevator had ashtrays inside and smoking was permitted throughout the Hospital – even in elevators. This former smoker was grateful for how far Providence had come as an organization.

Providence did not make a big public announcement about the policy. The leaders of the effort knew that the message would circulate in the community and they were well prepared to answer questions and inquiries that came in. Media organizations were interested, and many articles and news stories ran about the new policy. Leaders at Providence were excited by the level of attention received and the opportunity to elevate the conversation about tobacco use and its consequences. Even negative feedback created opportunities to raise the importance of the issue to a broader audience. For example, one person commented that because "Alaska Natives use tobacco at higher rates, they are being discriminated against." Providence was able to use this as an opportunity to talk about health disparities in general, and commit to working with partners such as the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium to reduce the incidence of tobacco use among Alaska Natives and other disparately impacted groups.

Putting the Pieces into Place

Along with a clear communication plan, the team leading the policy roll-out worked behind the scenes to make certain the proper administrative and support systems were in place. At Providence, this meant updating the online employment application to include the tobacco use screening question and making certain the system worked well, through internal testing. Along with updating the application process to match the new hire policy, coordination with the administrators of the new hire drug test occurred to see that cotinine was included on the list of substances for which new employees are tested.

Early Success

Providence's tobacco free hiring policy has made a difference. On an individual level, some job seekers who have been turned away because of their current tobacco use are motivated to change. Frequently, the hiring staff hear, "I'm going to quit and apply again in six months." There have been very few reports of job seekers answering the tobacco screening question falsely. Only about five people have made it through the application process and subsequently tested positive for cotinine during their new hire drug test. At the organizational level, staff members express support and appreciation for the policy. There is even evidence that it has encouraged existing staff who are smokers to quit. After Providence implemented the policy, there was an increase in utilization of the tobacco cessation services offered at Providence. The success of the tobacco-free hiring policy validates the comprehensive implementation approach taken by champions of the policy.

What's Next For Providence?

Providence Alaska has demonstrated that a tobacco-free hiring policy can be successful. The Providence Health & Services organization is currently evaluating the feasibility of implementing this same policy system-wide, where possible. Providence Alaska continues to work with fellow health care organizations to support them in similar efforts. The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) has been watching Providence's success with the tobacco-free hiring policy and there is opportunity to work together if ANTHC follows a similar path. Tammy, in particular, remains committed to policies that promote employee well-being and is working at a national level to better integrate employee well-being into the overall health management strategies of large employers.

Tobacco-free Hiring at Providence: The Job Seeker Experience

The on-line application asks: "Have you been tobacco free for six months?"

If respondent answers yes, they proceed through the remaining questions.

If successful with their application, a new hire drug test* is administered, which samples cotinine level (a nicotine by-product)

If respondent answers no, the applicant cannot advance through the application and they are encouraged to re-apply when they have been tobacco-free for six months.

**Approximately five people have been accepted by the on-line system and then later tested positive for cotinine. They were not offered employment.*

Tips to Share

- Prior to working towards a tobacco free hiring policy, make certain all the pieces of a comprehensive tobacco prevention program are in place, including a tobacco free campus and support resources to tobacco users who want to quit.
- Educate and socialize all members of the organization about the importance of new policies for a significant period before implementing in order to build support among leadership and on-the-ground staff. Providence did this for over a year prior to making the policy change.
- Do your homework and find answers to important questions. Some questions and concerns that Providence encountered included:

Is the policy legal according to federal and state law?

The Providence team conducted thorough legal research and found that in Alaska there were no significant challenges to the policy. However, in other states, such as Oregon, state law prevents employers from not hiring people who use legal substances during off work hours.

Will the policy be an issue with the unions representing our employees?

Providence worked closely with their union representatives to keep them informed. However, because the policy was only for new hires it did not affect existing contracts.

Will the policy limit our hiring pool?

Leaders at Providence were concerned that the policy might limit the ability to recruit and hire skilled workers, particularly specialists and in rural locations. This has not turned out to be the case, and staff have reported very few difficulties with hiring qualified candidates due to the tobacco-free hiring policy.

- Develop a clear communication strategy so that the organization is prepared to internally inform staff and job seekers of the importance of the policy and the organization's commitment to health; and externally, to answer question from the media, other organizations, interested decision makers, in order to encourage more large employers to follow suit.