



Walk-through Helps Iowa Providers Reduce Waiting Times



Gena Hodges, Program Coordinator with Iowa Department of Public Health, Division of Behavioral Health, Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Bureau, has been in the field for 27 years. As a career professional, she has seen the addiction treatment field evolve. An emerging challenge for the state of Iowa is making treatment available to an increasingly diverse population, which includes non-native English speakers.

Gena coordinates several projects, including disaster prevention and planning with substance abuse and mental health providers, culturally competent treatment, and recovery month activities. Fifty percent of her work is with the Iowa Strengthening Treatment Access and Retention-State Implementation (STAR-SI) project. All Iowa STAR-SI providers are also enrolled in the ACTION Campaign as one of their contract expectations.

Gena rates the walk-through as the best tool for getting providers started with a change project. “Providers love it when we do site visits,” says Gena. “The walk-through is the best tool for helping providers identify the first changes to work on. Little things like painting the entry way or even changing a light bulb can make a big difference to the client’s first impression, and do not require a PDSA cycle to change.”

Gena estimates that she’s conducted at least 10 walk-throughs at Iowa STAR-SI provider sites, posing as a client seeking treatment. During one memorable walk-through, the front desk staff sent her back and forth from the front desk to a chilly waiting room seven times due to paper work snafus. On that occasion, Gena posed as a client who had been court-ordered to treatment due to an OWI.

“The agency would not see me without my showing proof of ability to pay along with the court order that I had received an OWI. I talked to four different people before seeing a counselor—and I was asked to duplicate information four or five times. I had to sign off on multiple releases, and I wasn’t even sure I was going to be in treatment.”

From this experience Gena and her team learned that providers often ask for the same information and signatures in multiple places.

“The front desk needs to know the whole gamut of paperwork requirements,” says Gena. “The provider needs to reconsider all paperwork requests from the customer’s perspective.”

After 10 months in the STAR-SI project a second walkthrough at the agency was conducted. The initial process was much more efficient and the time it took to get to the counselor was cut by 45 minutes. Gena suggests a pre and post walk-through to measure change. Walk-throughs are also a good tool to train new staff on the process,



or to get a new perspective on how things could be changed to better meet the needs of the clients.

Through her site visits, Gena has also come to recognize the need for cross training and for information sharing. “When staff members know what each other do, they find ways to avoid duplication of effort.”

A great benefit of the walk-through is getting the front line staff involved in the change project from the start. “Front line staff have so much information to share and they feel valued when they’re part of the change process.” This helps with staff “buy in” as well.

The Iowa project has focused on outpatient treatment, but Gena is pleased to report that the Year One STAR-SI providers have implemented the five NIATx principles throughout their agencies, covering gambling and mental health as well as substance abuse treatment. One Executive Sponsor, Richard Swanson, has change teams in all seven of his agency’s sites. At a recent meeting Richard said, “All my decisions are now based on process improvement, and all my staff serve on change teams, including the janitor, who gets verbal feedback from the clients that have led to improvements.”

Gena is also confident that the success the Iowa providers are enjoying through the STAR-SI program will continue after the funding period, and that the ACTION Campaign will be part of their ongoing process improvement.

“We’re looking at the ACTION Campaign as a great sustainability tool for our providers and we’ll continue to encourage them to use the field-tested best practices it offers.”