

Best Practices

IN EMERGENCY SERVICES

BP Interview

Q&A with Sarah McEntee

Executive Director, Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services



In the early 1980s, the American Ambulance Association convened a workshop in Kansas City, Mo., to analyze the status of the EMS industry. Participants made a list of the 20 most pressing issues; the need for high-quality industry standards was at the top of that list.

Out of that workshop eventually came the independent, nonprofit Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS). Established in 1990, CAAS's mission is to encourage and promote quality patient care in the medical transport system through comprehensive, consensus-based industry standards. CAAS's board of directors includes representatives from the American Ambulance Association, the American College of Emergency Physicians, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians, the National Association of EMS Physicians and the National Association of State EMS Officials. CAAS also has a liaison representative from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

In December 2007, Sarah McEntee was appointed executive director for Glenview, Ill.-based CAAS. McEntee's interest in EMS started when she joined her local fire department's Explorer Program as a high school student. "I was bitten by the EMS bug," she says.

McEntee became a paramedic in 1989. She worked for Rockingham Regional Ambulance in New Hampshire, eventually becoming a field supervisor and manager. As accreditation and quality assurance coordinator, she helped Rockingham become the first CAAS-accredited ambulance service in her state. "I witnessed firsthand how the accreditation process could transform an organization," she says. McEntee later served as program director for the New England EMS Institute in Manchester, N.H.

McEntee joined CAAS in 2000, first as a CAAS site inspector and team leader for on-site reviews of agencies applying for accreditation. She also developed the CAAS accreditation helpline to provide guidance to candidate agencies.

McEntee spoke with Best Practices about some of the benefits of CAAS certification, and why now, despite tough economic conditions, might be a good time to start the process.

Q Is it true that CAAS is one of the industry's best-kept secrets?

I think we're hiding in plain sight. I realize that agencies are still learning about CAAS, and getting the word out can be a slow process.

Part of the difficulty is that EMS is very local—a local solution for a local community. So it's hard to reach everybody across the country at the same time. We go to many national EMS-related conferences and events, but many services don't participate on the national level. So in addition to attending those national events, one of our goals

over the past two years has been to attend more regional events.

Q How many agencies are accredited?

We have 128 accredited agencies now and another 15 that will be going to the panel over the coming year. [The CAAS Panel of Commissioners, which grants accreditation, is an independent, impartial body that meets quarterly and is made up of representatives from EMS medicine, law and business.] Our numbers are pretty evenly distributed between small, medium and large agencies. We have all types: commercial

services, government services, fire department-based, hospital-based, public-private partnerships and volunteer services. Our standards were specifically designed to be inclusive of all provider types.

Q What's the latest on states and other oversight entities requiring accreditation as part of licensure or contract requirements?

We have six states that have enacted EMS legislation that recognizes that CAAS-accredited services exceed state requirements. That allows accredited

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You can order the CAAS standards guide for \$25 and the application packet for \$100 at CAAS.org.

agencies to bypass some or all components of the state licensing or inspection process. We're currently working with 10 other states that are considering legislation with similar language. That said, CAAS was never meant to be exclusionary. The CAAS standards were designed to encourage and promote high standards of quality in the industry.

Q How does an agency get accredited?

It's a five-step process. The first step is to perform a self-assessment using the CAAS standards. That means evaluating your agency characteristic by characteristic, determining if you are meeting each standard, identifying where you need improvement, then making those internal changes. The second step is to complete the application and documentation package. The third step is going through an evaluation process, which includes an off-site review of all the application and documentation materials provided, then an on-site review, which takes approximately two days with a team of experienced CAAS site reviewers. Their role is to gather information and verify the service meets the standards established by CAAS. The fourth phase is deliberation, during which the application and all of the supplemental reports go to the Panel of Commissioners, which makes the determination if a service meets all of the requirements. The final step is accreditation.

Q How long does the process take?

Some of that depends on how ready your organization is when you go through the self-assessment process and how committed you are to making the necessary changes. Most agencies take between 12 to 18 months to do the self-assessment and application. Once they submit the application to us, the evalua-

tion and deliberation leading up to granting accreditation is about six months. So the whole process usually takes about two years start to finish.

Q Given the fiscal pressure many organizations are under, is this a good time to pursue accreditation?

A lot of agencies say, "Well, we'll wait until things are better." But the value of going through CAAS can be realized now, through increasing organizational efficiency and performance and decreasing risk and liability.

Many services view the value of CAAS as an external reward—the marketing, recognition and competitive edge that it provides their organization. Those are all very important, there's no doubt about that. But CAAS covers all aspects of the organization: clinical, administrative, operations, vehicle and facility maintenance, performance safety and compliance, communications and financial accountability. The process of going through CAAS accreditation requires an agency to evaluate itself against those core fundamental requirements, to recognize the things it does well and the things it could do better and to make those organizational changes that create that overall improvement across the full spectrum of the organization.

Agencies that have gone through the process report seeing increased productivity, as well as improved financial, clinical and safety performance. That includes fewer employee injuries, fewer clinical errors, fewer vehicle accidents, and reduced patient injuries or other patient-related incidents that could open the company to liability.

Q How does the accreditation process promote this?

Too often, not just in EMS but in every industry, people work in their own little silos. They don't realize the implications what they're doing has for the other parts of the organization. The CAAS process encourages agencies to go through their organization and

make sure all of those parts are not only streamlined, efficient and moving well, but that they are all working together. What is happening on the administrative side affects operations. Operational decisions affect clinical performance. Clinical performance should drive your training and improvement programs. Everything is tied together.

Q Are there examples of how CAAS accreditation benefits an organization when responding to an RFP?

We are seeing many contracts and RFPs now including language that requires CAAS accreditation in order to bid or to be considered a viable candidate. We're seeing other language that strongly encourages CAAS accreditation by assigning higher points or score values to those agencies that have it. Accreditation is very highly valued in the overall health care industry. When contracting for services, a lot of hospitals and other health care facilities are looking for accredited services.

Q Does CAAS accreditation affect employee morale?

Employees want to work for the best providers, and our agencies continuously report that employees have a strong sense of pride for where they work. They appreciate working for a company that has demonstrable procedures and resources for employee and patient safety and a strong clinical performance program.

Q How much does the accreditation process cost?

It's a tiered fee schedule based on small, medium and large companies. For a small company, the application and reviewer expenses would work out to \$8,500 every three years. [Accreditation is good for three years.] A medium company works out to about \$12,500 every three years, and a large company is just over \$15,000 every three years. It may seem like a large investment, but it's not that big for what you get back in return. 

— Jenifer Goodwin, associate editor