



Security Guards Employed by the Center

Most community centers use security guards to some extent to patrol around the outside of center buildings, drive through parking lots during the day and at night, walk through the facilities and stand watch over busy lobbies. The guards are employed by a security service that charges the center monthly for the service. The guards will not intervene in altercations between clients or between staff and clients. They will report situations to the police and to internal staff.

The pandemic and recent economic circumstances have created issues with the security services related to turnover, guard shortages due to recruitment and retention issues and guard attention to duties during their rounds. Motivated by continued issues with security services and an increasing climate of threat, some centers in larger urban areas have considered bringing the security service in-house. One center has already implemented an inhouse security service that seems to be working quite well. While performing a security assessment for its mental health clinics, a Fund Consultant observed the employed security guards at work. The guards wore blue pants with center logo polo shirts and carried cell phones with a walkie/talkie feature for ease of communication. They wore name badges just like every other employee that they used for door access. Some were stationed in lobbies or just outside the clinics where they greeted clients, often by name. The initial impression of management at this center was that the new arrangement was working very well with better coverage, better response to incidents and quieter lobbies with lower anxiety levels.

Before considering bringing the security guard function in house consider these questions:

- Do you have a good contract with your current service that states your expectations and provides metrics for the service to meet?
- Have you studied the optimum assignment of guards by location for high traffic times of day?
- Does your current security service assign an account manager to handle your complaints or requests for service?

It's possible that you may have good service and a responsive provider. If so the real considerations for moving security in house are better control, possibly lower costs and better responsiveness to your clients. If you do decide to bring the service in house here are some recommendations:

- If possible, hire guards who are familiar with the center, current employees or have prior applicable experience.
- Provide training through TEEX or possibly local community colleges. Training should also include SAMA or PMAB, mental health first aid, Red Cross first aid and client centered responsiveness training such as "Handle with Care."
- Avoid law enforcement style uniforms. Guards should be neatly attired in khaki style pants and center polo shirts that other staff members may be wearing.

- Orient new hires through the center NEO program and train them thoroughly in the mission of the center and the nature of the clients you serve.
- Appoint a team leader/supervisor who reports directly to the management level person responsible for security.
- Keep good metrics about the nature of incidents, location time and day of the week, name of the involved client and staff member. Analyze this data to adjust work assignments to help meet trends and traffic.
- Provide center cell phones with efficient communications processes for calling for help, issuing center-wide or location-specific alerts, contacting first responders and management staff.
- Introduce local law enforcement departments to the new system and invite them to visit and meet your staff.
- Establish policies and procedures for guard services and response to incidents. What are the center's expectations for the guards in responding to incidents of aggression, altercations, injuries and other emergencies like severe weather, active shooter, fire, bomb threats and impending tropical storms?
- Take advantage of training, webinars and workshops offered by local law enforcement.

Finally, on a pro forma basis examine the total cost of the proposed new system. Does it save you money and do a better job than your current security service?