



NEWS

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UNITY HOUSE Holds Agency-Wide E-Mail Training



AUBURN – Unity House of Cayuga County Inc., a leading provider of transitional and permanent housing, rehabilitative, and employment services and programs in six Central New York counties to more than 700 individuals a day with developmental disabilities, mental

health illnesses, and those recovering from chemical dependencies, held an agency-wide e-mail training on May 18, 2007 at the Springside Inn in Auburn, NY.

Presented by Kathy Diviney, Esq, a partner in the Syracuse-based law firm of Hancock and Estabrook, the training concentrated on educating the 58 agency directors and managers in attendance on the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of electronic communications and on recently revised and adopted agency electronic communications policies and procedures.

“We are fully into the era of e-mail, Internet, voice mail, and cell phone use and dependence, and we all need to be aware of the ramifications of our occupational activity with these indispensable communication components,” Unity House Deputy Executive Director Elizabeth Werner told the agency employees in opening the training and introducing Diviney.

“Our training’s purpose is to inform us all of the real and potential issues using e-mail, the Internet, voice mail, and cell phones.”

Diviney's 75-minute presentation began with a reminder to the attendees that their use of Unity House electronic communications is neither confidential nor private and that they should not expect as much given upon employment they consent to having such use monitored.

"Remember, the equipment and data you use is the property of Unity House and Unity House has every right to monitor, search, and use what you generate, send, and receive," said Diviney, a Long Island native who holds undergraduate and law degrees from Cornell University in Ithaca, NY and St. Johns University College of Law in Queens, NY, respectively. "Electronic communications are a permanent part of us now. Think about the facts. One hundred seventy billion e-Mails are sent every day, about two million every second. Just about every electronic communication these days can be stored and retrieved. Ninety-nine percent of new e-mail is stored electronically. Think about what's stored now: bank records, medical records, your consumers' records. The list is endless, and this applies to e-Mails, Internet use, voice mails, and yes, even your cell phones. It is imperative now that we all think about what we are doing when using these tools, that we use them only for business purposes, and that we be concise and brief."

Diviney told her audience that in general the potential problems arising from misuse of Unity House's electronic communications centered around issues of confidentiality, racism, sexism, and offensive behaviors. To demonstrate the extent of the problem, she referenced data mined from a 1999 nationwide survey commissioned by Elron Software that showed 60% surveyed admitted to sending or receiving adult-oriented, personal e-mails at work, 55% surveyed admitted to sending or receiving e-mails that were racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive, and one in ten surveyed admitted to receiving confidential information about other companies.

"These are the four general areas in which allegations, legal claims, and such are arising from misuse of electronic communications," she said. "The potential liabilities involve

everything from discrimination to harassment, copyright infringement, defamation, outright illegal activity, and litigation management. It really is a whole new world you need to be aware of and work well in.”

Diviney emphasized that although e-mailing is a widespread, acceptable, and effective way of communicating, in office settings using the phone and communicating face-to-face offer safer, more effective alternatives.

“Phoning or communicating face-to-face goes much farther building relationships and also provides you with a better method of delivering your message so it’s heard and understood,” she said.

Diviney provided the Unity House employees with a Best Practices guide to follow when accessing and using the agency’s electronic communications. The guide mirrors Exhibit A of Unity House’s recently approved and adopted Internal and External Communication guidelines, per section 500.530 of its Personnel Policy. It advises users to avoid using profane, racist or sexist language, jokes, pictures, and/or stories; to avoid sarcasm; to refrain from using electronic communications to discuss personal, personnel, highly confidential or otherwise sensitive matters; to use proper grammar in, and proofread, all communications before sending; to use any subject lines descriptively; to limit attachments and/or trail e-mails; to use “cc” and “bcc” sparingly; generally, to not forward communications without consent; and to delete any and all “chain” e-mails, jokes, cartoons, and non-business related e-mail.