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Even if Hospitals Drop Real Estate, Compliance Needs a 'Home Base'; Eyes Are on Workflow

By Nina Youngstrom

The money that health systems save on real estate may keep many of their employees working at home permanently to help make up for revenue losses related to COVID-19, but Samantha Karpenko, director of corporate compliance at MultiCare Health System in Tacoma, Washington, has asked leadership for a “home base” because “compliance needs a permanent physical presence.”

Like other compliance officers, Karpenko said she and her team have made a smooth transition to virtual work, stopping by the office once a week to pick up letters from external auditors that aren't sent electronically. But compliance isn't exclusively a work-from-home proposition. Employees should have a place to talk to the compliance officer spontaneously and in person. “It adds a level of complexity if you have to schedule a meeting room to have a private conversation,” Karpenko said. “It loses something in the ability to confide.” In-person meetings allow compliance professionals to make a connection with people who are reporting compliance concerns, reassure them and reinforce their decision to come forward. Reading body language and making eye contact to assess people's credibility, which is vital for conducting investigatory interviews, doesn't convert to a Webex room or a Zoom meeting, she said. “While we have proven our ability to work from home, it is crucial we have some sort of designated space.” If the health system gives up buildings, she said compliance would probably be in a new location and a smaller space, and staff could rotate in and out. “What that will look like, I'm not sure, but I feel very strongly about the argument,” she said. “From a compliance effectiveness perspective, we can only be effective if we are visible and available.”

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