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Meet Angela M. Alton: ‘I see a greater appreciation for compliance and privacy in healthcare’

by Angela M. Alton MPA, CIPP/US, CHPC, CHC; and Adam Turteltaub CCEP, CHC

AT: One of the more interesting things about compliance is that people come to it from so many different backgrounds. Even with that, your background is a very unusual one. You spent the early part of your career working as a deputy public guardian, serving as a conservator. First, what led you to that role?

AA: Shortly after graduating from college, I began working for a municipal government in San Mateo County. I had a bachelor’s degree in social work and, at the time, was intent on being a social worker. I held several positions within San Mateo County and accepted the position of deputy public guardian–conservator for adults diagnosed with severe mental illness. I took the role as I believed it would be a good step in the direction of becoming a social worker, which was something I was still interested in pursuing.

AT: What was the day-to-day experience like?

AA: Well, there wasn’t a “typical” day. As a conservator, there was responsibility for the individual’s medical and mental health needs, as well as managing their finances and housing. The typical caseload at that time was between 40 and 60 individuals who were either living in the community or in secured facilities. My days consisted of visiting clients, writing reports to the court, meeting with treatment teams, and addressing urgent situations. In a way, it was like running several households.

AT: I’m curious to know, were there any lessons from that experience that you found valuable for working in compliance?

AA: The exposure to many aspects of healthcare was extremely valuable. I learned about healthcare operations and benefits such as Medicaid and Medicare. I learned how to read and navigate a medical record. Those are some of the practical skills I acquired that have been very useful in the roles that I have held in healthcare compliance. As a deputy public guardian, I interacted with a variety of people, physicians, staff, family, law enforcement, and legal counsel, which provided me with the skill of being able to communicate complex matters effectively with a range of individuals. The most valuable experience I acquired—and still use today— was the ability to remain calm and focused during a crisis. As a conservator, I regularly encountered critical situations such as the sudden hospitalization of someone on my caseload or an individual ending up in the criminal justice system. There were a lot of decisions and actions that needed to happen in a short space of time, such as obtaining required court orders, notifying family, interacting with law enforcement, etc. That experience affected my approach to handling critical situations in the privacy realm. I have been able to calmly focus on the situation at hand and

initiate systematic strategic action to address the situation. I can lead in a calm manner in the midst of a storm. That does not mean I don't experience stress in critical situations: I believe my experience has allowed me to manage stress during critical situations.

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