

Healthcare Traveler

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Health Care Staffing Services certification: An interpretation for healthcare travelers

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As a healthcare traveler, you may already know that staffing firms can earn Health Care Staffing Services (HCSS) certification from The Joint Commission. Since certifying the first firm in 2005, The Joint Commission has continued to differentiate healthcare staffing firms via thorough assessment and evaluation of their business, credentialing, and performance improvement practices, which affect safety and quality of patient care. Hospitals tend to trust the process, since The Joint Commission is often the regulatory body hospitals pay to accredit their own healthcare services.

Background and description

Today, more than 200 firms have certification from The Joint Commission. Most healthcare professionals are familiar with The Joint Commission as an agency that hospitals pay to review and evaluate their services for compliance with the quality and safety standards set by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. This status is known as *accreditation*. The Joint Commission also offers *certification* for disease-specific care programs (e.g., stroke care, cardiac care), ventricular assist device programs, and healthcare staffing services. Similar to hospital accreditation, the HCSS certification process includes ongoing data collection, data analysis, and periodic on-site visits by a reviewer from The Joint Commission.

Criteria that must be met by a staffing firm before applying for initial certification include being based in the United States or its territories, employing clinical staff who provide direct patient care, and having placed at

least 10 different clinical employees on assignments. Furthermore, firms are required to assess and improve quality through the use of performance measures. The firm must be prepared to present at least four months of data for each of three standardized performance measures by the time of the initial on-site review.



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Once the application is accepted, first-time applicant firms are informed of the site visit date. For subsequent recertifications, an unannounced visit takes place within a 90-day window, identified and communicated to the firm by The Joint Commission. Site visits last from one to three days, corresponding to the volume of service provided by the firm. One or more reviewers arrive to fulfill a packed agenda, including but not limited to activities such as:

- An overview of the firm's history, span of business, corporate policies, practices, emergency plans, client characteristics, performance improvement initiatives, and quality assurance activities.
- A detailed examination of a minimum number of reviewer-selected travel employee personnel files each day.
- A detailed examination of a minimum number of reviewer-selected healthcare facility contracts each day.
- Tours of the corporate facility, including brief interviews with corporate leaders and staff as selected by the reviewer.
- Tracer activities, involving reviewer-selected traveler files and healthcare facility contracts.
- A minimum number of reviewer-selected healthcare facility telephone interviews each day.
- A minimum number of reviewer-selected traveler telephone interviews each day.

At the conclusion of the final site visit day, the reviewer meets with a designated group of corporate leaders to summarize the visit, noting any "findings" that must be addressed within a specific time frame. The firm is advised of its post-review certification status.

The certification cycle lasts two years, as long as standards compliance and participation requirements are maintained. An intra-cycle review is performed via teleconference approximately one year into each certification cycle. Certified firms are easily identified at jointcommission.org; by clicking on the "Quality Check" section, anyone may search for certified firms by name, state, or ZIP code.

Certified firms commit to participate in ongoing data collection and submission relative to three standardized performance measures identified by The Joint Commission:

1. "Do Not Use" for clinical reasons: The staffing firm tracks cases in which a healthcare facility has indicated that, for a clinical reason, the firm's clinical employee is not welcome to return to the facility.
2. "Do Not Use" for professional reasons: The staffing firm tracks cases in which a healthcare facility has indicated that, for professional reasons (behavior, attitude, communication issues, etc.), the firm's clinical employee is not welcome to return to the facility.
3. Personnel file completeness: A monthly random sample of traveler personnel files is examined to assess completeness of documentation to meet all Joint Commission-required criteria before and for the duration of assignments.

The standards

There are four categories of standards by which compliance is measured for HCSS certification, each with corresponding elements of performance. These standard headings are:

- Leadership (HSLD)
- Human Resources Management (HSHR)
- Performance Measurement and Improvement (HSPM)
- Information Management (HSIM)

How does this affect a traveler?

You may still be wondering what HCSS certification means to you, the traveler. HCSS certification affects travelers in a number of ways, and they are all favorable:

1. If you are employed by a Joint Commission-certified staffing firm, you may be asked to participate in a telephone interview with a reviewer during your firm's certification site visit. Similar to the hospital accreditation process, The Joint Commission's reviewer performs "tracer activities" at HCSS firms. The tracer methodology facilitates a firsthand process experience for the reviewer to learn about the firm's selection and preparation of a traveler from initial application for employment through the completion of an assignment. The

telephone interview is a brief, friendly, non-stressful experience, and travelers are typically eager to agree to participate when selected.

2. The Leadership standard identifies required content in contracts between the firm and healthcare facilities. Sufficient orientation and appropriate floating arrangements are examples of items addressed in this standard. The standard also requires that around-the-clock lines of communication with the firm be established and accessible to travelers and healthcare facilities. Leadership standards also require firms to have a risk management/reporting system established to foster the reduction of safety risks.

3. The Human Resource Management standard addresses the qualifications, competencies, and evaluation of clinical staff performance. Yours may be among the randomly selected personnel files in the random sample reviewed each month to meet data submission requirements for certification. As a traveler and a professional, you can take proactive measures by working with your recruiter to maintain current required documentation in your file at all times.

4. Certified firms are required, per the Information Management standard, to perform a hazard vulnerability assessment (HVA), prepare a plan to address emergencies that threaten to interrupt service, and periodically test that plan. This aspect of certification serves to reassure travelers who work for a certified firm that there is a documented and tested plan in place to ensure continuity of services that affect you as an employee. Personal and professional records that are provided to the staffing firm by travelers are more secure and less likely to be lost or damaged.

5. As described earlier in the article, the Performance Measurement and Improvement standard represents the essence of quality assurance by requiring data collection and analysis relative to feedback from healthcare facilities, as well as the review of randomly selected personnel files each month to assess compliance and identify corresponding opportunities for improvement.

6. Accountability to high standards of quality staffing to maintain a safe environment of care for patients has caused many healthcare facilities to consider accepting assignments only with Joint Commission-certified firms. In this respect, the number of positions and locations available to travelers may correlate with a firm's certification status, meaning that in working for a certified firm, you are likely to have more healthcare facilities to choose from for an assignment.

7. Travelers employed by certified staffing firms have selected a firm that demonstrates its commitment to quality and patient safety by voluntarily opening its doors and processes to third party external review. In doing so, the firm becomes transparent, opening itself to public disclosure on the decisions to the certification process that are posted on The Joint Commission's website.

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REFERENCES

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