A Look at the FQHC Staffing Landscape

By 2016, the Affordable Care Act is expected to increase the number of non-elderly insured Americans by 32 million. In addition, the ACA also provides for an expansion of Medicaid nationwide by easing eligibility requirements. Many of these newly funded patients are expected to receive care in Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC’s), which for many years have served as critical primary care access points for patients in medically underserved areas (MUAs) in the inner city and rural America.

At the same time, the Affordable Care Act is also influencing the way primary care is approached in the United States, transitioning from a sick care, fee-for-service model into a well-care, bundled (or even capitated) model. In this new model, which is also known as population health management, the emphasis will be on establishing for patients medical homes that focus on preventive care. FQHCs will serve as the medical homes for many of these patients.

In order for population health management to be successful, access to primary care becomes paramount. Currently, about 10,000 primary care physicians work in FQHCs nationwide, representing about 5 percent of the nation’s physician-based primary care workforce. Some estimate that as many as 15,000 additional primary care providers will be needed in FQHCs alone.

The looming physician shortage nationwide will make physician recruitment and retention exceedingly difficult. Integrating nurse practitioners and physician assistants into the FQHC delivery model will also be critical to maintaining adequate primary care access. This means that creative approaches to both physician and advanced practice recruitment and retention, such as utilizing locum tenens or temp-to-perm solutions, will be required.
What is Locum Tenens?

“Locum tenens” is a Latin phrase that means “to hold a place.” In layman’s terms, it is essentially a temporary physician, advanced practice professional or allied health provider. Traditionally, a locum tenens provider is one who temporarily fills in for another provider while he or she is on vacation or medical leave, attending a conference or otherwise unavailable to work. The term is now often expanded to refer to assisting with seasonal coverage needs or filling a vacancy until a permanent physician is hired, which is often referred to as locums-to-perm or temp-to-perm. Locum tenens providers are independent contractors that are paid by a staffing agency, which is in turn paid by a healthcare facility.

While it was once a rare occurrence for a hospital, clinic or practice to require coverage from a locum tenens provider, those needs have changed along with the changing healthcare landscape. The National Association of Locum Tenens Organizations (NALTO) estimates that among hospitals alone, three-quarters use locum tenens physicians to provide coverage or support for their permanent staff. Many healthcare professionals and facilities alike see the benefits of a “try before you buy” arrangement, which means temp-to-perm opportunities are also becoming more common.
Is Locum Tenens Right for Your Facility?

Coverage needs can be urgent or expected, short term or long term, and necessary or strategic. Locum tenens medical professionals can help address all of these situations. The questions below can help you determine if locum tenens might be the answer to your coverage needs.

1. Do you have an emergency need to maintain coverage?
Medical facilities often cater to the unpredictability of life, but they can also fall victim to it as well. Not every provider that works at your facility is going to be healthy and able to practice medicine every day, and health concerns are just part of the picture when it comes to unexpected coverage needs. Locum tenens is a great solution in such situations because locums staffing firms and the providers they work with are accustomed to jumping into action quickly in order to provide seamless coverage to your patients, and quality coverage can easily be acquired for short or long periods.

2. Would you like to try out a new physician before hiring someone full time?
With income lost following a physician’s departure, recruiting costs and startup expenses for a new physician, physician turnover is an expensive proposition. Some estimates place the cost of recruiting a new physician at three to four times that physician’s annual salary. That makes it all the more important to hire right the first time. The “try before you buy” nature of locum tenens lends itself well to a working interview, and allows both parties to assess one another and whether the opportunity and the physician are a good fit before signing on for something permanent. Even if you don’t opt for the working interview route, a locums provider can be a great stand-in while you vet permanent candidates.
3. Are you considering starting a new service?
Despite popular perception, locum tenens isn’t just for covering existing positions. It’s also a great tool for strategically testing the waters with a new service. Starting a new service line can be risky, but utilizing a locum tenens physician enables you to assess the viability of the service without initially committing to a permanent hire. This business incubator approach allows facilities to minimize investments in new services that may or may not succeed, while still aiming to expand their horizons and their bottom line.

4. Are you looking to maximize your profitability?
Locum tenens has a reputation for being expensive, but can actually be a very sensible investment. Ask yourself this: Which costs more, locum tenens coverage or lost business? After all, a patient that can’t receive care due to a lack of coverage may turn to another facility, never to return to yours. Often, the revenue lost when closing or partially closing a service far exceeds the cost of the locum tenens provider.

5. Do your staffing needs and patient volumes have seasonal variances?
In many locations throughout the nation, and for many different reasons, patient volume can be boom or bust from one season to the next. As patient volume experiences these peaks and valleys, so too does revenue. Locum tenens physicians can be a convenient and cost-effective solution to being overstaffed one month and understaffed the next, thus improving your patient and physician satisfaction and your bottom line.

6. Do you want to fight physician burnout?
Gone are the days when a career in medicine meant sacrificing any sense of a meaningful personal life. Today’s physicians demand reasonable schedules that allow them to attain work-life balance, and with shortages in many specialties, they’re often in a good position to make such demands. Providing locum tenens coverage for permanent physicians to take a break several times a year can work wonders in the battle against physician burnout and turnover. Locums physicians are also a great solution when your staff is feeling overworked, but there is not yet sufficient demand to hire another permanent physician.
How to Choose a Locum Tenens Staffing Company

While there are many similarities between individual locum tenens staffing companies, not all are created equal. So how can you find a firm that will help you secure the coverage you need while helping you make the most of your locum tenens experience? This helpful checklist can help guide you in your selection process.

1. How experienced are they in the industry?
This point applies to the locum tenens staffing company and the staffing consultants that they employ alike. For both parties, with experience comes knowledge and connections – two things that are vital to ensuring that working with a staffing firm is a positive endeavor. In the locum tenens industry, it often takes more than just a few years to build a strong database of candidates that can be promptly presented to the facility. Experience also means that, when the staffing firm’s database doesn’t already contain a suitable candidate for your facility’s particular needs, the consultant has the knowledge and resources to quickly market for new candidates that can be a good fit at your facility.

2. Do they listen to your needs?
There are few things worse than a sales experience that actually feels like a sales experience, especially when patient care is at the heart of what you’re purchasing. Instead of just extolling the benefits of working with their staffing firm, a staffing consultant should take the time to learn about your facility and truly listen to your needs. This helps ensure that you will be presented with qualified locum tenens candidates that genuinely have the potential to be a good fit at your facility rather than being on the receiving end of a consultant using a “see what sticks” approach to staffing. This is especially critical given that many locum tenens coverage needs are of the urgent variety and there’s often no time to waste reviewing candidates that don’t meet the needs you have expressed to the consultant.

3. What kind of professional liability insurance do they furnish to providers?

4. Are you looking to maximize your profitability?

5. How is their service model structured?

6. Do you want to fight physician burnout?

7. Are you considering starting a new service?

8. How is their policy used and how that company is rated.

9. Do they offer temp-to-perm solutions?

10. What type of professional liability insurance do they offer to locum tenens providers?

11. How do they ensure that their contracts are fair and reasonable?

12. Are they part of any associations, such as NALTO?

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3. What kind of professional liability insurance do they furnish to providers?
The type of malpractice insurance provided by a locum tenens staffing firm can give you a great deal of insight into the kinds of candidates you can expect them to present and how smooth the staffing process will be. You don’t want your facility to be the “deep pockets” if a claim is made, so be sure to understand the type of policy that will cover providers, the policy limits, what insurance company is being used and how that company is rated. When it comes to the type of policy, occurrence form is the most comprehensive type of medical liability insurance because it provides coverage regardless of when a claim is made. Also, make sure the policy limits are adequate and meet all state requirements. In addition, find out if the insurance company is rated by A.M. Best or Standard & Poor’s. The rating reflects the financial stability of the insurance company, which is indicative of their ability to pay claims.
4. How is their service model structured?
When you have a coverage need at your facility, especially an urgent one, there’s no time for multiple points of contact or acquainting a new staffing consultant with the general needs and dynamics of your facility. For the most efficient experience, look for a locum tenens staffing firm that operates under a single point of contact model. This means that a single dedicated consultant can fulfill your staffing needs even if you require coverage for multiple specialties, and that you get personalized service and attention every time. When looking at potential locums staffing firms to work with, also inquire about the average tenure of their consultants. Even a single point of contact won’t be a big benefit if that contact is constantly changing due to high turnover.

5. Are they helping you reduce costs?
Despite common misconceptions, when compared to the revenue lost by not having a physician or other provider in a given position, bringing a locum tenens provider on board to provide coverage can actually save your facility money. Not every locums staffing firm can maximize your savings though. In addition to finding a firm that offers competitive rates, look for those that can help you lower the peripheral costs of locum tenens too. A firm with a large database of providers and the ability to source new ones can often find candidates within driving distance of your facility, which can cut down on travel costs. However, depending on your location, the specialty you’re looking for, the time of year and a host of other factors, finding a local candidate might not be possible. In those instances, due to the volume of travel that they book and the relationships they’ve built within the travel industry, a staffing firm with an in-house travel department can deliver significant savings to your facility.
Ready to learn more about how locum tenens or temp-to-perm arrangements can solve your staffing challenges? As Your Proven Quality Partner in Medical Staffing, Medical Doctor Associates is here to help. Send us an email at info@mdainc.com or give us a call at 1.800.780.3500 to start a conversation today.
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4. How are their rates and how are they structured?

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