Tackling the Challenge — Linen Losses

Linen Management, Education and Relationships are Critical to Success

It’s estimated that the linen replacement rate for hospitals is as much as 100%. That sounds reasonable, right? But wait a minute, it’s also estimated that as much as 30% of your linen is lost to abuse, theft, hoarding, the trash or disposed of as Red Bag waste.

Imagine the cost savings to you and your clients if you could decrease linen losses by 10%? It’s an important endeavor that requires we educate ourselves, as well as our clients, on the value and importance of well-run linen programs.

Acknowledging the Warning Signs
So what are some of the signs that your linen program needs some help? Warning signs include:
• Damage to products,
• Late internal linen deliveries,
• Poor inventory control (too much/not enough),
• Increasing linen costs,
• A switch to a disposable item, and
• Customer complaints.

Step One: Understand the Problem
There are many ways linen losses happen. Healthcare linen is essential to running a facility, yet it’s taken for granted unless there is a problem — just like electricity or water. Linen is abundant in the healthcare environment. It’s easy for staff to grab more than they need or use inappropriately. To make it easy, let’s divide losses into Patient Care losses and Other losses.

About Patient Care Losses
Consider some of the primary locations and ways patient linen is lost:
• Emergency department (ER),
• Operating room,
• Neonatal unit,
• Emergency medical services units (EMS),
• Transports to nursing homes,
• Transport to mortuaries,
• Personal use.

A Few Words on Other Linen Losses
While misuse and abuse often lead to linen replacement or linen loss, customer and employee theft is more common than one would think. Consider:
• Support services staff using towels and washcloths for rags,
• Outside contractors using sheets, blankets and towels for drop cloths or rags.

Step Two: Develop Solutions to Halt Losses and Abuse
Review Inventory Management Practices
Inventory management is a MUST in controlling linen cost and losses. Whether you’ve identified a problem with a specific customer or need to fine tune your overall inventory control systems, consider these as central to a good inventory management program:
• Develop a Daily Linen Quota (Inventory) Sheet, –DOH Standards (three day par)
  • Make proper adjustments on a routine basis,
  • Linen room must be neat!
  –An organized linen room is the first step in inventory control
  –Put most frequently used items within easy reach
  –You can’t count what you can’t see
  • Visit with your client on a regular basis and conduct an audit of the linen room. Share how the inventory system works best and ask for their feedback. Listen to their challenges and offer solutions.

Establish Policies that Deter Losses
If your client doesn’t have policies that deter linen losses and the problems you are having, establish them yourself. Easy right? This is where relationships are so important.

Talk to your clients, find out what policies are in place and ask that they be enforced. Address any signs of misuse and abuse immediately. Take photos and document the problem!
When the client complains about their invoice, be ready with answers: photos that illustrate the problem, a policy that isn’t being followed or a policy that should be developed. For example: It’s easy to understand why support service departments grab linens for cleaning. But it’s wrong and they know it. Insist that the support services (or EVS) department buy their own rags.

**Provide Education**
In addition to reviewing inventory management programs and establishing necessary policies, educating our customers is equally important. If we can help them appreciate and understand what it takes to deliver their linen on time, they are more likely to comply with internal policies and your requests. The following offer a few options for educating staff:

**Linen Awareness Day**
If you are not already doing this, consider scheduling a Linen Awareness Day at each of your client locations, at least once a year. Sessions should last between 20 to 25 minutes each. To be successful, you need buy-in from the administration and departmental leadership. Each session should include:
- Introduction to linen service provider,
- Education on wash process,
- How specific linen items should be used,
- Issue of excess linen in patient rooms
- Unauthorized scrub use
- Discharge bed make-up policy (client agreement on this can save lots of headaches).

**Posters**
Another effective way to educate clients is through posters. ARTA has developed a few you are free to use, but the messaging should reflect each client’s situation. Use 8.5" x 11" paper and with a color copier, you are in the poster business. Consider hanging posters and fliers:
- On or near the unit cart/closet,
- On or near soiled linen containers,
- In a specific location where other communications are posted, and
- In the break room or bathroom.

**Linen Committee**
A linen committee can be an effective forum to help deal with the misuse and abuse that cause linen losses. Yes, it can be difficult to secure participation. Again, the relationships you build with internal contacts are critical. You need to identify an advocate in every department and then invite them to join the linen committee.

A few things to consider in setting up a linen committee:
- Linen committees should have the power to set policy and must have support from administration and nursing departments,
- Committee should meet initially on a monthly basis, but can lessen to quarterly meetings once established.

Your linen committee should include:
- Linen manager,
- Environmental services,
- Transport services,
- Infection control,
- Security, and
- End users from every department or unit.

**Step Three: Survey, Revise and Do it Again**
Establishing an inventory program, developing relationships, and educating clients are ongoing activities. The one common element that underlies an effective linen program is good communication. Without open communications and good client relationships, it’s near impossible to successfully tackle and halt linen losses.

To that end, have your customer service representatives survey clients on a regular basis. Consider a short monthly survey, followed by a more expansive annual review. Of course, if you do this, you MUST follow through on any issues, complaints or requests.

The payoff? Your client feels their opinion is important and you secure valuable feedback on your company’s performance.