

Underground Archives Offers Solutions for Physician Practices That Need Patient Records Management



By Elizabeth Pagel-Hogan

When privately held doctor's offices in Pennsylvania close, whether the physician retires or the practice joins a larger healthcare system, maintaining patient records in compliance with state law poses a challenge.

Underground Archives, a company in Western Pennsylvania providing storage, records management and archival storage offers a significant solution for physicians who need to maintain individual patient records.

Pennsylvania requires physicians to retain patients' medical records for at least seven years from the date of the last medical service that required a medical record entry is required. Records for minors must be retained until one year after the minor patient is an adult, and this can mean storing records for several years beyond the required seven.

State law also requires physicians to comply with a patient's request for their medical records within a "reasonable period of time," even if the physician is no longer practicing medicine.

These requirements often meant boxes of medical records could be found stacked in storage bases, attics, basements and garages and providing copies of individual records was an arduous task.

Staff at Underground Archives have handled five of these projects in recent months. When a doctor's office is shutting down, a team of professionals lead by Matthew Iezzi, will head in to the office and assess the situation and provide a solution that works for each individual practice.

"We usually send in 1 or 2 people to meet with the physician's staff," said Iezzi. "On our last project, the doctor had 75 bankers boxes worth of records that needed to be catalogued, transported and stored." notes that managing records isn't as easy as keeping a stack of boxes safe.

"People think its easy to access medical records but it's not, its a rigid, step by step process," Iezzi, on staff with Underground Archives over nine years. "We're protecting consumer but also protecting physicians practice. A lot of doctors are going crazy trying to figure out how to manage their records according to state requirements."

When the physician gives notice to the state that the practice is shutting down, the state is notified that Underground Archives is the custodian of the records.

"Once we take possession of the records, we're able to provide access to the records as needed," explains Iezzi. "Anyone who needs the records, from the individual patient to another medical office, has to go through the proper steps to retrieve the records."

Requests for records need to be completed on a form downloadable from the Underground Archives site. The request is notarized and then sent to Underground Archives.

"Once the request hits our desks here at Underground Archives, things move pretty quick. Within 24 hours we have the requested records scanned and transmitted electronically as an encrypted file to the release of information company that we partner with, called Discovery. Their staff, who are Registered Health Information Technologists, redact the records as necessary before releasing a copy of the records."

Redaction is necessary because not all the information in a record is permitted

to be released, even to the individual patient who is discussed in the record. Additionally, only copies, not original records, are allowed to be released.

"No one can release the original record. It belongs to the original practice and must be kept in case of lawsuits," explains Iezzi.

Having a company like Underground Archives manage records often means better compliance with state regulations. All staff are trained in HIPPA and state requirements and are bonded and are required to complete annual updates.

"Physicians treat patients they don't always know about releasing information," said Iezzi. "I've heard from doctors who used to just copy every page in a chart and just send it to patients. But not all of the info in a patient's chart can be released; there are guidelines."

Iezzi notes there are extra concerns especially when dealing with minors. "You need to identify who CAN make a request. It's trickier dealing with pediatric records when a request comes from non-custodial parent who doesn't have a legal right to the records. That's why we are thorough in following the process."

Technology allows for Underground Archives to provide this service to a larger geographical footprint of doctor's offices. Iezzi stated that their clients have come not just from western and central Pennsylvania but also eastern Ohio and they have provided consulting for a practice in New York. †

For more information, visit www.uarchives.com.

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