Recent Driving Exposures in a Social Service Organization

Likely each day in your social service organization you have staff driving to complete their duties, and occasionally they are transporting an individual your organization serves.

Recently United Heartland received a claim from an employee who was riding as a passenger in a minivan that was involved in an automobile accident. In the front seat of the van were the driver and another passenger, who happened to be a person served that had a propensity for outbursts and other escalated behavior. The injured employee was sitting in the middle of the second row bench seat where they would lean forward and provide assistance to the person served as needed.

The minivan stopped abruptly as it struck the rear of another motor vehicle. The driver and the individual served were secured by their seat belts. The employee in the back seat slammed forward and struck the back of both front seats. This employee severely injured a shoulder and arm requiring emergency surgery, numerous days off work and months of healing. The claim is expected to be well over $100,000 in total costs.

The injured employee stated she saw the driver look up from a cell phone immediately before impact. She assumes the driver was texting.

Do you have clear and enforced policies related to your employees' driving behavior? Has your organization ever considered establishing a policy on cell phone or distracted driving? And when you transport an individual served who has a known propensity for aggressive behaviors, where do you have them sit in the vehicle?

United Heartland offers you the following suggestions for these concerns:

1. Develop a distracted driver policy: Given the increasing research showing the significant impact distractions have on safe driving, and the propensity of people to talk and text while driving, your organization should implement a distracted driver policy. At a minimum the policy should:
   a. Indicate when or if it is appropriate to speak on a cell phone while driving; the best practice is to ban cell phone usage while driving.
   b. If cell phone use is permitted, the policy should:
      i. Require drivers to follow the legal requirements of the state in which they are driving.
      ii. Require use of a hands-free device.
      iii. Instruct drivers to only take calls while driving that are urgent/critical.
      iv. Make calls as short as possible.
      v. Ban speaking on a cell phone while driving in adverse conditions.
   c. Ban: texting, reading or responding to emails/instant messages, surfing the web, etc. while driving, as well as other distracting activities, such as reading a newspaper or book.
   d. Ban eating while driving.

2. When transporting individuals served who are a known risk for outbursts or escalated behaviors while in vehicles, those individuals should be transported with a non-driving staff member next to them, in a rear seat. This allows the driver to focus on driving and removes the individual served from the vicinity of the motor vehicle controls.