

Guide to Interpreting and Operationalizing Regulations

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Interpretation

Interpreting a regulation means going beyond reading the words on the page to understand what the regulation requires in practice. Regulations are written broadly and often leave room for provider judgment. Interpretation helps you translate legal language into clear expectations for staff, informed decisions, and consistent daily practices that support safety, quality, and the rights of individuals served.

While regulations may feel extensive or complex, they are designed to protect and promote the safety, well-being, and comfort of individuals served. Keeping this purpose in mind can help guide decision-making and ensure compliance efforts remain focused on meaningful outcomes, not just technical requirements.

Understanding Purpose and Intent

A purpose statement explains why a regulation was created and what it is meant to achieve. Not every law includes a purpose statement, and it may not be clearly labeled. When a purpose statement is included, you can often find it in the first subdivision of a section, in a “scope” or “applicability” section, or in the introduction at the start of a chapter.

A simple way to apply a purpose statement is to ask: “What is this regulation trying to make sure happens?”

Regulations are designed to balance multiple priorities, such as safety, resident rights, access to services, and public expectations. Understanding these underlying goals can help you better interpret the regulation and understand the reason behind its requirements.

As you review a regulation:

- Question your assumptions. Do not assume you know what the regulation means. Think about different ways it could be interpreted.
- Focus on the “why.” Consider how the requirement supports resident safety, well-being, and comfort.

- Think ahead. Consider how your decisions today affect future processes and day-to-day operations. Build processes, procedures, and workflows to meet the purpose of the regulation in your own setting and for staff doing the work.
- Build practical systems. Develop processes, procedures, and workflows that meet the intent of the regulation in your specific setting and support staff in carrying out the work consistently.

Break Down Regulations

Breaking down a regulation means taking it step by step to clearly understand what it requires. Slow down and look closely at the words, conditions, and expectations. Ask yourself, “What does this actually mean for us?”



Tip: Use the *Interpreting and Operationalizing Regulations Worksheet [11_ Interpret & Apply Regulations Worksheet]*.

When you read a regulation, identify	
What is mandatory?	These are the things you must do. Look for words like <i>must</i> or <i>shall</i> .
What is optional?	These are things you may do but are not required to do. Look for words like <i>may</i> , <i>if applicable</i> , or <i>at the provider’s discretion</i> . Optional items matter, because they give you flexibility.
What needs to be documented?	Sometimes the regulation requires written proof even if the action is simple. Examples may include training logs, assessments, and care plans.
What outcomes are expected?	Regulations are designed to make something happen. Compliance means achieving the regulation’s purpose, not just checking boxes.
What does the regulation <i>not</i> say?	If the regulation does not tell you exactly how to do something, you can design a process that works for your organization, staff, and the individuals you serve, if the outcome is met.
How does this regulation connect to other requirements?	Regulations often relate to other statutes, definitions, or your internal policies. Breaking them down helps you see the bigger picture and avoid conflicts or gaps.

Person-Centered Approach

A person-centered approach means making decisions that are best for each individual person served. You still follow the regulation, but you do it in a way that fits the person.

Start with the person's needs.

Ask what they need to feel safe, respected, and supported while still meeting the regulation.

Adjust the “how,” not the “whether.”

Two people may need the same thing, like an assessment, but the way you complete it can vary based on their routines, needs, and preferences. The requirement stays the same, but the delivery can be personalized.

Respect preferences when possible.

If the people served have choices, like mealtimes or morning routines, honor them if the regulation and safety requirements are still met.

Make care meaningful.

Regulations tell you what must be done. Person-centered care helps you decide how to do it in a way that feels supportive, not like a checklist.

Use regulations as tools for safety and dignity.

Most regulations exist to protect individuals served by organizations. Use the regulations to help improve quality of life.

Operationalization

Operationalization means turning regulatory requirements into practical, day-to-day actions that staff can understand, follow, and consistently apply. It involves translating regulations into workflows and assigning responsibilities.

Engage Interdisciplinary Teams

Putting a regulation into practice requires involving people who understand different parts of your organization. No single person has a complete view of how all operations work together, and working together helps ensure processes are practical and effective. This is where an interdisciplinary team (IDT) plays a key role. An IDT brings together individuals from different roles (e.g., clinical, operational, environmental, administrative) to support compliance and quality efforts. By combining these viewpoints, the team helps interpret regulatory requirements accurately, implement them in realistic ways, and ensure they are supported across the organization.

Include staff who do the work.

Frontline staff know what is realistic, what might cause problems, and what will help things run smoothly. Their involvement makes solutions more practical, whether it is providing input or actively participating in the development of procedures and workflows.

Include staff from different departments.

People from clinical care, information technology, administration, and support roles all bring different viewpoints. Sometimes you may need outside experts, like fire marshals or consultants, when a regulation requires special knowledge.

Consider the full impact.

A change in one area often affects others. Consider how a new process might affect safety, communication, workflow, or staffing roles.

Look for shared solutions.

Many regulations overlap. When possible, create processes, documentation, or training that meet multiple requirements at once. This saves time and keeps things consistent.

Connect Regulations to Your Daily Work

Review your current policies and procedures.

Keep it simple! Compare what the regulation says with what you already do. Look for gaps, outdated steps, or places where your practice does not match the requirements.

Translate the regulation into actions.

Break down the requirements into steps your team can complete. Think about what needs to happen in:

- Workflows – the steps staff follow.
- Documentation – what must be recorded and where.
- Staff roles – who is responsible.
- Training – what staff need to know.
- Monitoring – how you'll check consistency.

Update internal materials.

Make sure policies, forms, checklists, guides, and electronic systems match the regulation, reflect real practice, and do not include anything that confuses or contradicts the requirement. If two regulations seem to say different things, pause and sort out the differences before moving forward.

Make it fit your setting.

The regulation stays the same, but the way you follow it should make sense for your size, staffing, people served, resources, and building layout.

Document Your Interpretation

When a regulation is unclear, write down how you understand it and why you understand it that way. This creates a record of your reasoning and shows regulators you acted thoughtfully and in good faith. While this documentation does not prevent a citation, it can help explain your decision-making if questions arise. Your documentation should include:

- What the regulation says (quote or summarize).
- What part was unclear.
- How you interpreted the unclear part.
- Why you interpreted it that way (definitions, cross-references, purpose, expert input).
- What actions you took based on your interpretation.

Use tools like the *Interpreting and Operationalizing Regulations Worksheet [11_ Interpret & Apply Regulations Worksheet]* to keep this process organized and consistent. Think of this documentation as your “paper trail” to help you explain your interpretation was carefully thought through.

Put Regulations into Daily Practice

Once you understand what a requirement means, you need to make sure it is followed the same way every day. This means training, assigning accountability, and creating a simple system to check it is being done.

Identify training needs.

Decide what staff need to know or regularly do to meet the requirements correctly. Training can be a quick huddle or reminder; a short, written guide; formal skills checks; or annual or ongoing training.

Monitor compliance.

Monitoring helps you make sure the requirement is done consistently and alerts you if something starts to slip. Use tools such as audits, checklists, and spot checks. Make sure you are storing these documents as evidence of compliance.

Network with other organizations.

Connecting with other organizations is a valuable way to strengthen compliance. It allows you to learn from peers who work under the same regulations and gives insight into how others successfully prepare for surveys.

Staying connected with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), provider associations, agencies, and licensing boards helps you remain informed and aligned with current practices. These connections give you access to important resources such as updates, webinars, trainings, group discussions, and new or emerging best practices. You can find curated lists of Related Agencies, Boards, and Associations on the MDH website for [assisted living](#) and [home care](#).

Seek Legal Guidance

Some regulations are complex or use wording that can mean more than one thing. If you are unsure about a particular regulation, ask for help. A short conversation can prevent costly mistakes. Getting legal guidance will help confirm your interpretation and give you a defensible reason for your decisions.

- Contact an attorney when a regulation is unclear, conflicts with another regulation, or affects resident rights or safety.
- Use regulatory or compliance experts, especially those who understand Minnesota statutes and licensing regulations.
- Get answers before you build processes or train staff.