

The Value of Regulatory Science in Human Care Licensing

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the importance of regulatory science in human care licensing, emphasizing the work of the National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA). It explores how evidence-based, strategic regulation can improve safety, quality, and efficiency across diverse care settings. NARA advocates for identifying the “right” rules through scientific methods rather than increasing or decreasing regulation arbitrarily. The paper introduces regulatory science as a growing field, outlines its ethical foundations, and presents NARA’s educational initiatives to support regulators. It calls for greater collaboration, research, and workforce development to advance regulatory science and improve outcomes for individuals in care.

Keywords: Regulatory Science, Human Care Licensing, Child Care Licensing Inspections, Child Welfare Inspections, Adult Care Licensing Inspections, Foster Licensing Inspection

Introduction

The National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the health and safety of individuals in regulated care settings through the advancement of human care licensing and regulatory practices. NARA represents all human care licensing, including adult residential and assisted living, adult day care, child care, child welfare and program licensing for services related to mental illness, developmental disabilities and abuse of drugs or alcohol. We are human service regulatory professionals, human service providers, university faculty, independent researchers and consultants, allied professions from health, safety and legal disciplines, consumers and all others who share our vision (NARA, 2025). This article outlines the vital work of NARA with an emphasis on highlighting and growing the field of

regulatory science.

Across the nation and beyond, regulatory agencies are experiencing a foundational shift in thinking about the role, benefits and risks surrounding the regulatory environment within the human care industry. A changing regulatory environment refers to the dynamic nature of laws, rules, and guidelines that govern business operations and various industries. These changes can stem from various factors, including technological advancements, shifts in societal or political values, and emerging risks. Organizations must adapt to these changes to maintain compliance and avoid potential legal and financial repercussions.

Regulatory changes can significantly impact how businesses operate, potentially requiring adjustments to their products, services, internal processes, and compliance procedures. State and provincial agencies are increasingly finding themselves in a

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place where good faith attempts to mitigate risk have resulted in complex regulatory systems that negatively impact the licensing agency, providers, and/or their clients.

A proactive approach to regulatory change management is essential for agencies to stay ahead of the curve and avoid potential problems. Maintaining regulatory compliance is not only a legal obligation but also a strategic imperative to operate effectively and avoid negative consequences. Clear, research-based licensing systems are essential to safeguarding vulnerable populations while promoting quality care. With increased calls for more and for less regulation by politicians and policymakers, NARA emphasizes a foundation in regulatory science, providing a solid foundation for developing and implementing licensing standards as well as effective and efficient oversight systems.

NARA as an Industry Leader

NARA advocates for effective and efficient systems that are not about “more” or “less” rules but instead identifying the “right” rules to provide the highest level of protection (Fiene, 2023). NARA recognizes the human care industry often have trouble balancing quality, affordability, and availability. Therefore, finding the “right rules” though strategic and scientific methods prioritizes quality while allowing for flexibility and efficiency thus enabling better care.

To accomplish the mission of consumer protection through prevention, NARA provides leadership and forums for broad public consideration to find effective and affordable means of consumer protection and support for an expanding human care and service industry. Among

our partners are providers, consumers and their families, regulators, advocates, concerned citizens, business and religious communities, policymakers, universities, researchers, and allied professionals from the academic, technical and treatment disciplines (NARA, 2025).

As mentioned earlier, NARA's primary purpose revolves around consumer protection through prevention by fostering excellence in human care regulation and licensing. This involves:

- Promoting the health and safety of children and adults: This is the core of NARA's mission, focusing on safeguarding vulnerable individuals in environments like child care, adult day care, assisted living, and facilities for those with mental illness, developmental disabilities, or substance abuse issues.
- Strengthening the knowledge and skills of regulators: NARA aims to enhance the capabilities of professionals responsible for applying laws and regulations that ensure consumer health, safety, and well-being.
- Developing educational materials and professional resources: Providing materials and opportunities for learning to regulators, the public, and educational institutions is a key part of NARA's purpose.
- Providing technical assistance and consultation: NARA offers guidance to policymakers on the operation and management of the regulatory process.
- Creating a community of professional practice: NARA fosters collaboration and knowledge sharing among human care regulatory professionals, providers, researchers, and other stakeholders. (NARA, 2025)

To achieve its purpose, NARA offers a range of services including training and

education, professional credentialing, consultation and technical assistance, membership services and research.

Regulatory Science as a Specialized Field in Human Care Services

The early learning industry has been the primary focus of human care regulatory advancements over the past 50 years. The lessons learned through early learning are adaptable to other human care fields; the same methodology can be transferred to other fields such as adult care and child welfare services. However, there is the need to conduct scientific testing in all human care regulatory fields. Protecting customer safety is one of the core responsibilities of regulatory science. Human services combine various fields, including law, public policy, data analysis, and risk assessment to inform and guide regulatory decision making. The goal is to ensure regulatory compliance with licensing requirements crucial to maintaining quality standards and safeguards for the well-being of individuals receiving care.

Advancing regulatory science within human care services is ever more possible with the emergence of modern technologies. Technology allows for more efficient data collection and analysis through data management and analysis software, automation, and even real-time monitoring. These technological tools are increasing the ability for informed decision-making, particularly through tools like big data analytics, leading to streamline processes and enhanced regulatory compliance through accountability, efficiency, and transparency (ACF.gov, 2012). However, technology alone cannot fully address the risks and responsibilities of licensing agencies without sound research and methodologies to ensure the validity, reliability, and credibility of oversight

structured approaches to oversight policy and systems.

“What I have found in my most recent readings is that regulatory science is being applied in many different content silos from the FDA, to economics, to banking, and of course within the human services, particularly adult and child residential services. What appears to be lacking is a unifying theory that goes across these disparate content areas. The field of regulatory science is a very young field. Although regulations have been kicking around for well over 100 years, the science behind regulations is probably a quarter of this time. So, there is not a great deal of empirical evidence to draw upon which is discouraging but it is very encouraging and exciting at the same time because so much needs to be accomplished in establishing regulatory science theory.” (Fiene, 2024)

Regulatory science specific to human care administration is relatively new; innovative methods and strategies emerge yearly. The emergence of regulatory science specific to the field of human care licensing demonstrates a needed shift from the current practice of a top-down style of regulation to a more adaptive and evidence-based framework. A truly effective regulatory system requires a scientific understanding of human behavior, the unique dynamics of licensing agencies, and the impact of rules on achieving desired societal outcomes. While regulatory science provides these foundational concepts, it must also be translated to the workforce. In addition to scientific discoveries, agencies and leaders should consider the need for adequate and ongoing training to ensure legislators and

regulators understand and comprehend scientific outcomes and their impacts on everyday work.

There is a general sense of urgency to reinforce regulatory science as a crucial science to delivering data-based decision-making in human care licensing. Unfortunately, agencies may not have the skills or resources needed to advance the science; not just the financial resources but also supportive scientific ecosystems to continue the advancements in this important work. To adequately advance this emerging field, our communities should:

1. Address the shortage of experienced regulatory scientists.
2. Advocacy to institutions of higher learning to create an academic culture that understands the need to develop regulatory scientists.
3. Increase collaborations between the regulatory and the scientific communities.
4. Create safe spaces that support collaboration and participation within regulatory research and projects.
5. Begin to create a shared understanding of the need to advance human care licensing through more developed approaches that are inclusive of client perspectives. (Institute of Medicine, 2012).

NARA is committed to advancing the field of regulatory science by building existing scientific evidence and strategies while working with agencies to develop data-driven and evidence-based licensing and assessment, and training tools. Regulatory science is not just about following regulations; it is about understanding the science behind those regulations and using that knowledge to make informed decisions.

Regulatory Science Course

Regulatory science in the human care industry is a field that uses scientific methods to inform, evaluate or develop tools, methods, standards, and systems that support a better understanding of safety, quality, and effectiveness of licensing systems. It plays a crucial role in the human care licensing system development and assessment by ensuring safety, efficacy, and quality of services, products, and practices that ultimately lead to the protection and well-being of individuals receiving care.

NARA has developed a course that can assist agencies or individuals on their regulatory science journey. The goal of this course is to introduce and familiarize human care regulators with the concepts, basic principles and components of regulatory science as a field of study in human care licensing industries. Regulatory science informs the development and implementation systems of those standards, ensuring providers and caregivers meet those standards and protects the public from harm while promoting quality care.

However, regulatory science consists of more than simply using data and analytics to guide decisions regarding licensing systems and practices. While scientific methodology is applied, scientists in this field also need to be knowledgeable and proficient in their ethical obligations to the study, vulnerable populations, agencies and clients to which licensed programs serve. It's also critical to understand how research is conducted and the various tools available. This course introduces two primary pillars of research; preventing harm (do no harm) and increasing benefit (do good). These two pillars can best be defined in three areas of licensing work; standards development, safety and efficacy, and monitoring and

enforcement.

The NARA course outlines and reviews the importance and need of scientific discoveries in human care oversight systems. It also outlines the systematic steps that emerging researchers need to follow to ensure the work is transparent when conducting research, as well as ethical practices that are critical when considering regulatory research in any agency. Finally, a brief overview of current and emerging methodologies is described to guide regulatory scientists to further scientific discoveries in human care regulation that will lead to more effective and efficient licensing systems and better outcomes for those in care.

Conclusion

Regulatory science supports continuous improvement in human care licensing by identifying gaps in knowledge, promoting research, and developing innovative methods and strategies for oversight and monitoring. By using scientific strategies, agencies can strengthen the scientific basis for regulatory policy decisions, improving the capacity for safety and efficacy evaluations and monitoring. Regulatory science is essential in human care licensing because it acts as a critical framework that uses scientific approaches to establish, monitor, and improve the quality and safety of care, ultimately protecting individuals receiving human services and fostering a more accountable and trustworthy system.

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