

Federal Office Releases Strategic Plan For Health IT

Initiative Focuses On Certifying EHRs

The federal Office of the National Coordinator (ONC), which oversees government-led initiatives to advance the adoption of interoperable health information technology (HIT), has issued a five-year strategic plan to guide federal agencies toward the goal of most Americans having access to electronic health records by 2014.

access and use by care providers” and patients; and

- Population health, described as enabling “the appropriate, authorized, and timely access and use of electronic health information to benefit public health,” research, quality improvement, and disaster preparedness.

The plan describes objectives and strategies for each goal, following the themes of privacy and security, adoption, interoperability, and collaborative governance. In the area of adoption, for example, the plan outlines 12 strategies for promoting the nationwide deployment of HIT—electronic health records (EHRs), personal health records, and other consumer IT tools—to benefit individual and population health. These

strategies include:

- Remove business obstacles for provider use of EHRs by 2011;
- Make EHRs easy to buy and implement by 2010;
- Promote certified health IT products by 2011;
- Minimize provider liability when using health IT by 2012;
- Minimize the burden on providers of population health reporting by 2013; and
- Optimize the exchange of EHR and population health information among users by 2013.

The plan stressed the importance of

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implementing a process for certifying EHRs to the widespread adoption of HIT. Certification is needed to ensure that EHRs “meet specific criteria for critical functions and security and ultimately incorporate the federally recognized standards to achieve interoperability,” the plan said. “We are also working on other approaches to increase the adoption and use of health IT, such as incentives for use of EHRs to improve the quality of care.”

ONC’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2009 is \$66.2 million. This includes \$26 million for “architecture and adoption.” The budget establishes limited HIT adoption targets, focused on physician practices. ONC proposes to boost physician adoption of EHRs to 30 percent in fiscal year 2009, up from 10 percent in 2005. It also envisions that in fiscal year 2009, half of physician offices will have adopted EHRs that meet certification criteria.

—Lynn Wagner



The plan “for the first time brings together all federal efforts in health IT in a coordinated fashion,” said an introductory statement from Robert Kolodner, MD, who heads ONC. “It will guide the advancement of health IT throughout the federal government for the next five years.”

The plan, which covers the years 2008 through 2012, is built on two primary goals:

- Patient-focused health care, defined as facilitating “the transformation to higher quality, more cost-efficient, patient-focused health care through electronic health information

Bill Promotes HIT Adoption, Standards, Privacy

Legislation designed to advance the use of health information technology has been drafted, but not formally introduced, by key members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The measure draws from and builds upon several initiatives that have been proposed in recent years. It has provisions similar to a Senate bill that has been a focal point of legislative activity in this arena but has stalled over issues related to the privacy of information.

The latest House bill was developed

by a bipartisan group headed by Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), chairman of Energy and Commerce.

“Although shifting from paper to electronic health records would greatly benefit patients and health care providers, we currently lack the infrastructure to make this much-needed transition work,” said Dingell in a statement. The draft proposal would “encourage faster adoption of health information technology while also ensuring that patients’ health information is protected,” he said.

Specifically, the draft legislation would:

- Make the Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) a permanent agency within Health and Human Services;
- Establish two federal advisory committees to help ONC develop policies and standards for the exchange of HIT and implementation of a nationwide infrastructure;
- Create a program of voluntary certification for HIT products;
- Establish a grant program to facilitate the purchase of HIT that meets certification standards;
- Provide additional grant programs for loans to help providers purchase HIT and for the development of regional or local health information plans; and
- Implement a series of privacy and security requirements, closing some of the gaps that have raised concerns. For example, business associates as defined by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act would be responsible for the same privacy and security safeguards as covered entities and would be directly accountable for violations, consumers would be notified of any breach in data security, and patients’ names and Social Security numbers would be stripped from data that is shared with additional entities. If this impeded essential health care operations, providers would share the “minimum necessary” amount of data.

—Lynn Wagner