

HHS Announces Developments in National Health Information Network Initiatives

The Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) announced several updates last week in its efforts to promote health information technology adoption and make progress on President Bush's [executive order](#) to implement electronic health records (EHRs) for all Americans within 10 years. HHS detailed its work to these ends and the progress of its "Decade of Health Information Technology" endeavor, and has issued requests for proposals (RFPs) related to a national collaboration on information systems interoperability.

HHS Secretary Leavitt said in a statement that the public and private sectors must partner on EHR standards. "The national strategy for achieving interoperability of digital health information is for federal agencies -- who pay for more than one-third of all health care in the country -- to work with private-sector health care providers and employers in adopting an architecture, standards, and certification process," he stated.

HHS has given tangible form to this collaborative by establishing the American Health Information Community (AHIC), which will develop recommendations on how best to digitize health records while preserving the privacy of individuals. HHS will solicit nominations for members to serve on AHIC (up to 17 will be appointed), and Leavitt will serve as chairman.

AHIC will be granted a two-year charter with an option to renew for up to five years. After that, HHS intends for AHIC to transfer its role to a private-sector health community initiative that would provide long term oversight for the project, develop additional standards, and certify new health information technologies.

In the meantime before that "changing of the guard," Leavitt has launched the next phase of HHS's health IT strategy. This stage is set to take place over the "next 500 days" and entails coordinating public and private health IT efforts, arranging studies, underwriting technology prototypes, and funding demonstrations to advance health IT.

HHS issued four RFPs soliciting participation in this phase of the health IT effort to:

- Develop, create prototypes for, and evaluate a process to unify and harmonize industry-wide health IT standards development, maintenance, and requirements over time;

- Develop, create prototypes for, and evaluate a conformance certification process for health IT, including the infrastructure or network components through which health IT systems interoperate;
- Assess and develop plans to address variations in organization-level business policies and state laws that affect privacy and security practices, including those related to HIPAA [the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996], which may pose challenges to interoperable health information exchange; and
- Develop, create prototypes for, and evaluate a "nationwide health information network" architecture or other widespread health information exchange that can be used to test specialized network functions, security protections, and monitoring, and demonstrate the feasibility of scalable models.

An evident objective of these RFPs is to draw the private sector more deeply into the government's efforts to develop a national health information exchange. A similar goal led HHS to survey a broad range of private industry individuals on what they require and expect from health information technology. The resulting "[Summary of Nationwide Health Information Network Request for Information Responses](#)," released last week, includes the comments of more than 500 respondents on how the nation should proceed in achieving health information exchange.

The comments "provide invaluable 'first specs' for a plan that will transform health care in America," according to Leavitt. Respondents expressed a variety of opinions on the proposed nationwide health information network, or "NHIN," but strong support emerged for some basic concepts:

- **A NHIN should be a decentralized architecture which is Internet-based and linked by uniform communications.**
- **A NHIN should reflect the interests of all stakeholders and work as a partnership between public and the private sectors.**
- **A governing body composed of public and private stakeholders should oversee the creation of standards and policies.**
- **A NHIN should incorporate enough safeguards to ensure that it does not infringe on the privacy of individual patients.**
- **The federal government should play a role in nurturing a NHIN by incorporating incentives, fostering systems of coordination, and establishing standards of accountability.**

- **Success of a NHIN depends on overcoming challenges related to the lack of precise and uniform standards, financing the development and operation of the system, privacy concerns, and potential conflicts between state laws and the federal initiative.**

Respondents also provided feedback on how to govern, operate, and support a NHIN. Their responses took up nearly 5,000 pages, and more than 120 officials have now joined a federal task force to analyze this window into public attitudes on health information technology. National Coordinator for Health Information Technology David J. Brailer characterized [the report](#) as "one of the richest and most descriptive collections of thoughts on interoperability and health information exchange that has ever been assembled in the U.S."