

Health Information Compliance Alert

Information Technology: Feds Roll Out Free Health IT Software

Federal Health Architecture aims to help providers CONNECT.

The Department of Health and Human Services' wants to link public and private health information technology systems to the government's Nationwide Health Information Network - and is offering free software as an incentive.

HHS' Federal Health Architecture is heading up the job, according to a press release. FHA, an "E-Gov" initiative led by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), is making this free software, called CONNECT, and supporting documentation available at www.connectopensource.org.

The National Health Information Network's goal is to tie together health information exchanges, delivery networks, pharmacies, government health facilities and payers, labs, providers, private payers, and other stakeholders into a "network of networks," HHS says. The NHIN will allow previously disconnected systems and exchanges to connect to each other and share data.

NHIN Standards Make the Grade, HHS Says

The NHIN uses interoperability standards recognized by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, as well as public and private sector specifications, participation agreements and policies, HHS claimed in the release. To enable health information exchanges over the NHIN, the ONC is working to develop the necessary governance processes and legal framework network participation.

Benefit: "This software will strengthen our health systems' ability to share data electronically and provide a wide range of benefits to citizens," said **Robert Kolodner, MD**, national coordinator for health information technology. "Benefits include up-to-date records available at the point of care, enhanced population health screening, and being able to collect case research faster to facilitate disability claims, as demonstrated by transfers of information already underway between the Social Security Administration and MedVirginia, a regional health information organization."

The CONNECT software is the outcome of a 2008 decision by more than 20 federal agencies to connect their health IT systems to the NHIN. Rather than individually building software required to make this possible, the federal agencies, through the Federal Health Architecture, created CONNECT. Each agency can use this shared software solution within its own environment, HHS explained. CONNECT implements the core services defined by the NHIN, including security standards to protect health information when it is exchanged with other health organizations.

CONNECT May Help Speed Up Health IT Movement

The agencies built CONNECT using open source components and will make it available under an open source license to encourage innovation and to keep costs low, HHS said. CONNECT will be available to the entire health care industry, which is expected to speed NHIN adoption among health care organizations.

"Federal agencies accomplished something remarkable in developing CONNECT. They looked beyond their individual needs to the needs of the group as a whole, and they collectively built a solution that provides benefits to all involved much faster and at a significantly reduced cost than if they had worked independently," Kolodner said. "Not only did the agencies deliver a valuable product for use in the federal government, CONNECT is now an option for any public or private sector organization that wants to use the solution in the future to tie into the Nationwide Health Information Network when it goes into full production."

Collaborative effort: The Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Indian Health Service, and the National Cancer

Institute have tested and demonstrated CONNECT's ability to share data among one another and with private sector organizations. In February 2009, the CONNECT software gateway was used for the first time in a limited production environment when the SSA began receiving live patient data from MedVirginia through the NHIN.

"Delivering CONNECT has been an enormous project, and we still have a lot of work to do to move us to large scale production usage. But with the support of the federal agencies and industry, we can accomplish the lofty health IT goals set at the national level," commented the Federal Health Architecture's program director **Vish Sankaran**.

Private and public sector organizations can download CONNECT, HHS said. As with other open source solutions, organizations are encouraged to modify and expand the software capabilities.

The cost kicker: Although the download is free, an organization opting to use the solution should be aware it will be responsible for costs associated with its implementation and maintenance within its own environment, HHS said.

Resource: More information about HHS health information technology activities is available at www.hhs.gov/healthit.