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Alaska Health Information Technology Update

Background

The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, enacted as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), established the State Health Information Exchange Cooperative Agreement Program. This program awards cooperative agreements to states and territories to establish health information exchange (HIE) capacity in their respective jurisdictions. HIE aims to facilitate access to and retrieval of health care data to provide secure, timely, efficient, effective, equitable, and patient-centered care. In March 2010, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) entered into a cooperative agreement with the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) to create an HIE in Alaska.

The HITECH Act also established a program to provide incentive payments for eligible Medicare and Medicaid professionals to adopt, implement, or upgrade electronic health record (EHR) technology. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) expects to start registering providers into the incentive program in January 2011.

The purpose of this Bulletin is to update health care providers and other stakeholders on what DHSS is doing to facilitate the development of an HIE in Alaska and assure that qualified Alaska providers are eligible for the EHR incentive payments.

Definitions

- *Health information technology (HIT)*: the application of information processing involving both computer hardware and software that deals with the storage, retrieval, sharing, and use of health care information.
- *Electronic medical record (EMR)*: An electronic record of health-related information on an individual that can be created, gathered, managed, and consulted by authorized clinicians and staff within one health care organization.
- *Electronic health record*: An electronic record of health-related information on an individual that conforms to nationally recognized interoperability standards and that can be created, managed, and consulted by authorized clinicians and staff across more than one health care organization.
- *Meaningful use*: The use of a certified EHR in a manner that demonstrates attainment of specified quality measures (as defined in CMS's EHR incentive program final rule)¹ that result in improvement in health care quality and efficiency, patient safety, and coordinated care.
- *Health information exchange*: the electronic movement of health-related data among consumers, providers, and organizations within a region, community, or health care system according to agreed upon standards and protocols.

Developing an HIE in Alaska

In June 2009, Senate Bill 133 was signed into law requiring DHSS to establish an HIE with a non-profit governing board that represents Alaska's various stakeholder communities. In January 2010, DHSS submitted a draft HIT plan to ONC that details the development of an economically sustainable HIE in Alaska. When the plan is approved, it will be posted on the DHSS HIT website.² In March 2010, the Governor named DHSS as the State Designated Entity to implement Alaska's HIE under the ONC Cooperative Agreement Program. In April 2010, DHSS contracted with the Alaska eHealth Network (AeHN)³ to be the non-profit governing board that

will procure and manage Alaska's HIE. AeHN has published a request for proposals for an HIE software vendor; the vendor selection is expected to occur in September 2010.

Incentive Payments

DHSS has begun the process of developing a statewide HIT plan that will define how the state will implement CMS's EHR incentive program in Alaska. To aid in this process, DHSS has developed a health care provider survey that will assess the degree to which HIT has already been adopted among Alaska providers and identify what resources are needed to implement meaningful use of EHR technologies in Alaska. When approved by CMS, the statewide HIT plan will allow Alaska to access funds for implementing the incentive program and make qualifying Medicare and Medicaid providers eligible to receive up to \$63,750 over 6 years to adopt, implement, or upgrade EHR technology and to meet federal meaningful use criteria in 2012. Qualified acute care and children's hospitals will be eligible to receive \$2 million or more if they meet the EHR incentive program's criteria.

Qualifying providers and hospitals will be able to register for the Medicare and Medicaid EHR incentive payments through a CMS website that will be available in January 2011. CMS will inform DHSS which Alaska providers and hospitals have registered for the EHR incentive program. DHSS will provide the Medicaid EHR incentive payments to hospitals and providers after verifying that they meet the program criteria. CMS will provide the Medicare EHR incentive payments to eligible hospitals and providers.

Discussion

The goal of an HIE is to facilitate access to and retrieval of clinical data to provide secure, timely, efficient, effective, and equitable patient-centered care by reducing errors, redundancy, and costs. A robust statewide HIE cannot occur without providers having EHRs that are capable of sharing data with the HIE. The EHR incentive program is designed to help facilitate widespread adoption of EHRs among providers. Prior to implementing the EHR incentive program in Alaska, DHSS needs to assess provider readiness for meaningful use and determine the anticipated number of eligible providers. This assessment is being facilitated, in part, through a health care provider survey.

The funding for DHSS HIT-related program activities comes from several federal agencies (e.g., CMS, ONC, the Federal Communications Commission, and others), as well as state and other non-governmental funding sources. With multiple agencies and funding sources involved, the need for careful coordination is heightened. DHSS is committed to coordinating these efforts in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for Alaskans.

Recommendation

Health care providers should complete the 10-minute on-line EHR survey to help DHSS develop an electronic health plan that works for all Alaskans and provides incentive dollars to qualifying providers. The survey is available at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/Z5XN6FV>

References

1. Medicare and Medicaid EHR Incentive Programs home page. Available at: <http://www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms/>
2. Alaska Health Information Technologies home page. Available at: <http://hss.state.ak.us/hit/>
3. Alaska eHealth Network home page. Available at: <http://www.ak-ehealth.com>