

November 25, 2009

Tony Trenkle  
Director  
Office of E-Health Standards and Services  
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services  
7500 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21244

Dear Mr. Trenkle:

I would like to take the opportunity to introduce the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and describe its perspective on health information technology and meaningful use. Members of my staff have scheduled a meeting with you for December 14<sup>th</sup>; however, given the timeline for the implementation of the meaningful use criteria and provisions specified in the HITECH Act of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, I would like to convey some of NACCHO's recommendations for maximizing meaningful use of health information technology by local health departments (LHDs).

NACCHO is the national organization representing local health departments. NACCHO's mission is to be a leader, partner, catalyst, and voice for local health departments in order to ensure the conditions that promote health and equity, combat disease, and improve the quality and length of all lives. NACCHO serves the nearly 3,000 LHDs across the U.S. that have a vested interest in helping to fulfill the promise of improving health and health care with the use of health information systems.

As meaningful users, LHDs provide a wide range of services that could be enhanced through the use of electronic health records (EHRs):

- LHDs provide direct primary care to Medicaid patients. More than 70 LHDs operate federally qualified health centers and approximately two-thirds of all LHDs receive reimbursement from Medicaid.
- LHDs provide services to improve population health (e.g. diabetes care and smoking cessation) and most of the beneficiaries are low-income adults and children, usually Medicaid recipients. To maximize health improvement, LHDs should be able to coordinate these population-based services with the patient's primary care physician through a health information exchange (HIE) or health outcomes will suffer.
- LHDs are stewards of health for the population of their jurisdiction. To perform this role effectively, they need to be able to bilaterally exchange information electronically with healthcare providers in order to efficiently conduct disease surveillance, track immunization rates and analyze laboratory reports, among other tasks.

As safety net providers serving the most vulnerable populations including patients without health insurance, local health departments that provide primary care services should be able to receive bonus payments. To realize the full potential of meaningful use criteria and gain maximum value from the Medicare and Medicaid bonus payments, NACCHO recommends the following:

- CMS should allow either eligible professionals or the facility in which they work (including LHDs) to claim the bonuses. LHDs are collections of eligible professionals which will implement and meaningfully use EHRs. The patient volume threshold of 30% of Medicaid beneficiaries should also be applied to the entire LHD rather than each eligible professional.



- CMS should provide financial assistance for LHDs to implement health information technology in advance of meeting the meaningful use criteria. Many LHDs are under severe financial strain and will not have the ability to implement an electronic system before receiving bonus payments.
- Some LHDs may provide services such as home visitation or chronic disease management but do not provide direct primary care. These LHDs need support to develop systems that will allow them to engage with an HIE to send and receive the information called for in the meaningful use criteria and coordinate care with health care providers. These LHDs may not be able to meet all meaningful use criteria because they do not provide the same level of services as comprehensive primary healthcare providers, however, they should still be able to receive bonus payments provided that they meet all the possible meaningful use criteria.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. Local health departments and their staff have an essential role to play in improving the health of all Americans. Many LHDs serve the same population groups as are eligible for and enrolled in Medicaid. Only by supporting LHDs to fully participate in EHRs and HIE will the best health outcomes for all Americans be possible. I look forward to discussing these topics in the future.

I regret that I will be unable to attend the meeting scheduled between you and NACCHO staff on December 14, however, I have asked Valerie Rogers, NACCHO Program Manager, Public Health Informatics, to respond to any questions you may have. She can be reached at (202) 507-4257.

I look forward to future discussions of these issues and encourage your support for these recommendations as the meaningful use definition and rules for implementation of the HITECH Act are finalized.

Sincerely,



Robert M. Pestronk  
Executive Director