Centers Advise Practices on HIT Selection, Use

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

Looking to buy or implement an electronic health record in your practice? Help is on the way.

The Department of Health and Human Services has awarded more than $640 million in grants to set up regional extension centers around the country, with the goal of helping physicians and hospitals achieve "meaningful use" of electronic health record (EHR) technology. At press time, several centers were preparing to enroll physicians.

The staff at these regional extension centers will work "elbow to elbow" with physicians, Dr. David Blumenthal, national coordinator for health information technology, said during a press conference to announce the final round of regional extension center grants.

In April, HHS awarded more than $267 million in grants to 28 nonprofit organizations that will set up Health Information Technology Regional Extension Centers. This builds on more than $375 million in grants that the agency awarded for 32 regional extension centers in February. The funding is part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The main goal of the regional extension centers is to help physicians and other health care providers to become meaningful users of EHRs, even as the standard for meaningful use is being defined through federal rule making.

Under the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, a part of the 2009 federal stimulus law, physicians who treat Medicare patients can earn up to $44,000 over 5 years for the meaningful use of a certified health information system. Those with patient populations of at least 30% Medicaid can earn up to $64,000 in federal incentive payments.

To help physicians become meaningful users, the regional extension centers will provide a broad range of services, Dr. Blumenthal said, from helping physicians select the most appropriate equipment for their practice through the implementation of the products. The centers also will help practices purchase technology in groups at reduced prices, he said.

Farzad Mostashari, a senior advisor in the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, encouraged physicians to enroll with their regional extension center as soon as possible, even before they make a decision about purchasing an EHR product.

Physicians can expect to get a lot of assistance from the regional extension center staff, he said. For example, the practice staff and the regional extension staff may have weekly contacts as the practice works to establish a work plan for implementation, as well as during the implementation period. Afterward, the regional extension center staff may check in with the practice on a monthly basis to see how they are progressing with quality improvement and workflow design.

Initially, the regional extension centers will focus on aiding primary care providers in small practices. HHS estimates that the 60 regional extension centers will provide services to at least 100,000 primary care providers and hospitals within 2 years. Small, primary care practices are being targeted because this group reaches a large number of patients, Dr. Blumenthal said, but they are also the least likely to be able to afford to purchase health information technology support services in the private market.

Although the stimulus law directs the regional extension centers to give priority for direct technical assistance to primary care providers, all physicians are encouraged to participate in the outreach and educational opportunities of these centers, according to HHS. The agency defines primary care as family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, or obstetrics and gynecology.

In addition to small practices, HHS is also reaching out to small hospitals. HHS plans to award another $25 million to regional extension centers that work with critical access and rural hospitals with 50 beds or less. Small hospitals have an especially difficult time finding the resources and expertise to successfully adopt health information technology, Dr. Blumenthal said. ■