



## New financial incentives and Regional Extension Centers help small practices acquire electronic health record systems

by Diane Gaddis, CPHIMS, CPHIE

**P**ractices considering the implementation of an Electronic Health Record (EHR) system often ask: Are we ready? How do we pay for it? Which system is right for us? How can we implement the system with minimal disruption to our practice? What do we need to know about data security and patient privacy?

One key to success in adopting EHRs is to ensure that your practice has the help and guidance it needs to select the right system, implement it, and effectively utilize the technology. This can lead to improvements in office workflows, better and timelier access to critical information, and further enhance the provider/patient relationship.

For this reason, the federal government has allocated \$677 million in funding through the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, to establish at least one Regional Extension Center (REC) in every state. These centers are charged with providing education and technical assistance to primary care providers to help them adopt and achieve "meaningful use" of certified EHR systems.

Eligible providers who do achieve meaningful use can receive up to \$44,000 per provider in Medicare incentives or up to \$63,750 in Medicaid incentives to offset the cost of implementing a system.



According to survey data released in January by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, four-fifths of the nation's hospitals, and 41 percent of office-based physicians, intend to take advantage of these federal incentive payments.

RECs, many of which are connected with state universities or existing health information exchanges, are non-profit organizations bringing together information technology professionals who have experience or training in implementing systems or adoption challenges. They act as trusted, vendor-neutral advisors, and can also help providers navigate the federal requirements necessary to receive reimbursement for system adoption.

Services vary among RECs and are based on the organization's experience and market needs. Some services may be free, while others are subsidized, so they are priced below prevailing market rates. Typical services can assist practices with:

- EHR system selection, implementation or project management
- EHR meaningful use achievement
- Privacy & security best practices
- Workflow redesign
- And much more

If your practice is already using an EHR, the REC can assist in creating a roadmap to meeting meaningful

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use guidelines so that you can qualify for the adoption incentives. Bottom line is that the RECs are poised to be advocates for the practice in helping them navigate the EHR adoption and incentives pathways.

In order to receive REC services, you must first enroll in the program. Enrollment is limited to a certain number of providers, and may be free for eligible professionals in some markets. To qualify, providers in your practice must be MDs, DOs, NPs, CNMs or PAs who work in Family Practice, Internal Medicine, OB/GYN, or Pediatrics, and practice in any of the following:

- Small practices (10 or fewer providers)
- Ambulatory clinics connected with a public or critical access hospital
- FQHCs, community health centers and Rural Health Clinics
- Other providers predominately serving uninsured, underinsured, and medically underserved populations

Timing is important. Talk to your designated REC as soon as possible. Not only is your practice on a deadline if you want to meet meaningful use standards in time to earn

the maximum incentives being offered, but your extension center may also be on a deadline for funding.

Under Medicare, incentive payments diminish as you delay demonstration of meaningful use; in fact, there are Medicare penalties beginning in 2015 for providers who have not. Vendor backlog is expected as practices rush to avoid these Medicare penalties, so we recommend you enroll in your area's REC now to benefit from the assistance available to navigate through the next steps.

To help you navigate EHRs and the road to meaningful use, visit: [www.healthit.hhs.gov/rec](http://www.healthit.hhs.gov/rec) to find the REC in your state. ■



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*is the President and CEO of Community Health Centers Alliance, Inc. (CHCA) a non-profit health center network with over a decade of experience in health IT implementation, support, and management services. CHCA now operates The Center for the Advancement of Health IT, a regional extension center serving 41 counties in northern and southwestern Florida. For more information, visit [AdvanceHealthIT.org](http://AdvanceHealthIT.org).*