

Health information exchange project expected to spur innovation and jobs

With the recent selection of the Ohio Health Information Partnership (OHIP) as the lead organization in developing a statewide health information network, the state of Ohio has signaled its intent to significantly advance health information technology in Ohio.

OHIP has been charged with implementing and overseeing a statewide health information exchange with the goal of improving access to data and patient information while ensuring patient privacy. At the same time, the initiative will provide many opportunities for innovation in its exploration of new and better ways to accomplish this goal.

"In the short-term, there will be many opportunities for creativity, innovation and jobs," said Tony Dennis, BioOhio President and CEO. "We'll be looking for people who can show us best practices in many areas."

OHIP was formed as a subsidiary of BioOhio, but has its own fully independent board managing strategy and operations. BioOhio is a nonprofit organization that promotes growth in bioscience industry, research and education in Ohio.

Ohio already has a well-established regional health information exchange system – HealthBridge in Cincinnati – and other initiatives under way, but the new statewide network will be a separate effort, says Carly Glick, spokesperson for the Ohio Department of Insurance.

"There weren't any existing entities that perfectly matched our vision," she said. "So we needed to start fresh and start quickly and have broad representation throughout the state with our partners."

OHIP's initial board includes representation from the Ohio Hospital Association, the Ohio State Medical Association, the Ohio Osteopathic Association, state government and BioOhio. The partnership will soon expand its board to include representation from health care payers, the business community, the university system, behavioral health providers, community health centers and consumers.

"Once OHIP is operational and the federal grants are in, the intent is to spin it off on its own," said Tony Dennis, BioOhio President and CEO.

OHIP eventually will be linked to a nationwide effort to connect health records throughout the country, Dennis said. "The National Health Information Network began under the previous administration and identified the need for a national IT network," he said. "This initiative was strongly supported by the Obama administration to be funded under ARRA."

Dennis said BioOhio had been thinking about the issue of a statewide health care information exchange for a couple of years. "At the same time we were looking into the issue, the state already had senior people working on it with a large consortium of partners from across the state. Given our resources and capabilities in pulling together private/public partnerships, and the extensive effort already under way, it made sense for us to work together."

Part of what BioOhio does is periodically review the strengths, assets and needs of bioscience in Ohio. "What has come out of those studies and meetings with bioscience leaders is the realization that there is a significant need and opportunity to organize our health information technology.

"This is something that has no downside to it – it will be good for patients, hospitals, physician practices, payers and the vendors. It will improve efficiency, effectiveness and delivery of health care. It's one element of health care reform, but it dates back to before people started talking about health care reform this year."

Funding for the initiative

"What's interesting about this is the federal government decided not to pay out stimulus money directly to the state to set up the health information exchange – instead, they are granting it to a nonprofit that is representative of all of the various health care interests in the state," said Peter Pavarini, Health Care Practice Group Leader at Schottenstein Zox & Dunn Co. LPA law firm in Columbus. Schottenstein Zox & Dunn is OHIP's designated counsel.

The state's 2010-2011 biennial budget has allocated \$8 million in non-general revenue funds to the Ohio Department of Insurance to support efforts in health information technology. The Department of Insurance will work together with OHIP to oversee the use of this money and the application for federal resources.

Opportunities for innovation

OHIP will begin its search to meet the challenges of building a statewide health information exchange by reaching out to the technology community and others for ideas. Ross Kayuha is CEO of Strategic Thinking Industries (STI), a company housed in the TechColumbus incubator that specializes in providing information technology to women's health care providers, especially labor and delivery departments in hospitals. STI has developed interface solutions that can efficiently integrate data between departments, and its software is used in many hospitals in Central Ohio.

"The technology is already there. Interfacing of data, and privacy and security issues have for the most part been solved," Kayuha says. "The so-called 'soft factors' will be the biggest challenges."

The state funding allows OHIP to apply for federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds that have the potential to bring another \$70 million into the program for the next two years.

Next steps

While Ohio officials want to get the statewide initiative under way as soon as possible, a timeline and next steps won't be established until the board is named and holds its first meetings. "We're just getting underway but the plan is to move very quickly," Glick said.

A public forum on the new initiative will be held from 10-11:30 a.m. Friday, Sept. 25, at the Riffe Studio One Theatre, 77 S. High Street, 4th floor. The public forum is open to all interested parties to discuss the state's health IT vision and to solicit feedback. Additional information on OHIP as well as details about this public forum and future events is available at www.healthcarereform.ohio.gov/healthit.aspx.

These include political issues, the state of technology among providers and the willingness of those involved to participate. "Some hospitals are still using paper records. Plus, competing hospitals may be unwilling to share their existing information with others and some large health care corporations don't have the ability to exchange data within their buildings, let alone their systems," Kayuha said. "Also, when doctors are hired by hospitals they often come with the caveat that they use a specific data system. What happens if that doctor doesn't want to participate or the data doesn't interface well with OHIP's?"

Many of these challenges boil down to changing the culture within the health care industry, Pavarini says. "The public needs to be educated that this is in their best interest and will not violate their privacy," he says. "Providers need to be educated to start using electronic records, and that the more they share their data with their peers the better off everyone will be.

"You can't make the system more efficient without data – it is needed in order to help people make the right ethical and medical decisions about health care," Pavarini says. "Right now, that data is dispensed and locked into proprietary data systems that make it difficult to access in order to analyze it and answer questions."



Tony Dennis, BioOhio President and CEO



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