



HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

HHS is Continuing Efforts to Define a National Strategy

Highlights of [GAO-06-346T](#), a report to Subcommittee on Federal Workforce and Agency Organization, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

As GAO and others have reported, the use of information technology (IT) has enormous potential to improve the quality of health care and is critical to improving the performance of the U.S. health care system. Given the federal government's influence in the health care industry, it has been urged over the years to take a leadership role in driving change to improve the quality and effectiveness of medical care, including the adoption of IT. In April 2004, President Bush called for widespread adoption of interoperable electronic health records within 10 years; established the position of the National Coordinator for Health IT, who was appointed in May 2004 and released a framework for strategic action two months later. In May 2005, GAO recommended that HHS establish detailed plans and milestones for each phase of the framework and take steps to ensure that those plans are followed and milestones are met. HHS agreed with our recommendation.

GAO (1) assessed the progress being made by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) since 2005 to develop a national health IT strategy and (2) provided an overview of selected federal agencies' health IT initiatives related to the national health IT strategy.

What GAO Found

HHS has continued efforts to develop a national health IT strategy. For example, HHS—through the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT—has established the organizational structure of the office and awarded \$42 million in contracts intended to advance the use of health IT. These contracts address a range of issues important to encouraging the adoption of IT such as reviewing standards activities for gaps and duplication (see table). In addition, HHS has established the American Health Information Community to obtain public and private sector input on how to make health records digital and achieve interoperability for health information exchange. HHS intends to use the results of the contracts and the Community proceedings to define future direction. Key HHS divisions also continue funding and supporting the development of health IT initiatives that support the goals of the framework. According to the National Coordinator, he intends to release a strategic plan with detailed plans and milestones later this year.

Health IT Contracts Awarded by HHS's Office of the National Coordinator

Contract	Date		Cost	Description
	Awarded	Duration		
Standards Harmonization Process	September 2005	1 year	\$3.2 million	To develop and test a process for identifying, assessing, endorsing, and maintaining a set of standards required for interoperable health information exchange.
Compliance Certification Process	September 2005	1 year	\$2.7 million	To develop and evaluate a compliance certification process for health IT, including the infrastructure components through which these systems interoperate.
Privacy and Security	September 2005	1½ years	\$11.5 million	To assess and develop plans to address variations in organization-level business policies and state laws that affect privacy and security practices, which may pose challenges to health information exchange.
National Health Information Network Prototypes	November 2005	1 year	\$18.6 million; 4 contracts	To develop and evaluate prototypes for a nationwide health information network architecture for widespread health information exchange.

Several federal agencies collaborating with HHS—namely, the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Commerce, and the Office of Personnel Management—also have responsibility for their own health IT initiatives related to the national health IT strategy. These agencies participate in the American Health Information Community. Veterans Affairs and Defense play critical roles in the advancement of electronic health records, which they have developed and are implementing in their facilities. The Office of Personnel Management is attempting to use its position as one of the largest purchaser of employee health care benefits by encouraging its carriers to use applications such as enabling a physician to transmit a prescription electronically to a patient's pharmacy of choice. The National Institute for Standards and Technology is also providing technical expertise in the standards development and harmonization process and established a Web site to assist in standards development efforts.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-346T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David A. Powner (202) 512-9286 or pownerd@gao.gov.