

# FEDERAL RESOURCES TO HELP RURAL PROVIDERS ACHIEVE MEANINGFUL USE

Health care providers serving the approximately 50 million Americans who reside in rural communities face special challenges in their effort to deliver quality care. The realities of distance, isolation, and constricted resources can complicate health care delivery. Health information technology (health IT) can help ameliorate some of those problems. However, rural health care providers face several barriers to health IT implementation. These include:

- Lack of broadband internet access;
- Not enough skilled IT personnel; and
- Insufficient financial capital to implement electronic health record (EHR) systems.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is committed to helping rural providers overcome these challenges. The HHS Rural Health IT Task Force formed to ensure the effective use of Federal resources to help rural providers qualify for meaningful use incentive payments and to help enable rural America to benefit from health IT.

Several different Federal agencies and departments are involved in the effort to help rural health care providers transition to electronic health records (EHRs). Below are some of the Federal resources currently available for rural providers interested in achieving meaningful use of health IT.

## The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC)

ONC is charged with coordinating nationwide efforts to implement health information technology and the electronic exchange of health information in all areas of the country—urban, suburban, and rural. ONC has established the following programs to help providers adopt and meaningfully use EHRs:

- Regional Extension Centers (RECs), which are located across the country, support and serve health care providers to help them quickly become adept and meaningful users of EHRs. Most of the RECs have received extra funding to help critical access and rural hospitals convert from paper-based records to certified EHR systems. The RECs are set up to:
  - o Provide training and support services to assist doctors and other providers in adopting EHRs
  - o Offer information and guidance to help with EHR implementation
  - o Give technical assistance as needed

For more information on the REC program or to find the REC that serves your area, go to <http://healthit.hhs.gov/rec>.

- The Health IT Workforce Development Program trains skilled professionals in the field of health IT to enable them to help providers adopt and meaningfully use EHRs. This includes training for health workers now employed in rural practices and facilities, with broad opportunities for distance learning.



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- The Community College Consortia to Educate Health Information Technology Professionals, which is made up of five regional groups of more than 70 community colleges in all 50 states, has implemented non-degree health IT training programs for skilled professionals that can be completed in six months or less. For more information on the Community College Consortia and to find the consortium that serves your area, go to <http://healthit.hhs.gov/communitycollege>.

## Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)

The HRSA Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) is charged with coordinating activities related to rural health care within HHS. ORHP has tools and resources to help rural providers adopt and meaningfully use health IT:

- The Rural Assistance Center (RAC), a product of HHS' Rural Initiative, was established in December 2002 as a rural health and human services information portal. RAC helps rural communities and other rural stakeholders access the full range of available programs, funding, and research. RAC offers many services to help inform decisions affecting rural health, and all services are provided free of charge. For more information about RAC resources, go to <http://www.raonline.org>.

Other ORHP tools and resources include:

- Rural Health IT Adoption Tool Box—a resource targeted toward rural providers seeking to implement health IT to improve the overall effectiveness of their practices. The Tool Box is available at <http://www.hrsa.gov/healthit/toolbox/RuralHealthITtoolbox/index.html>.
- Rural Health Clinic Technical Assistance Series—a series of conference calls that are produced in conjunction with the National Association of Rural Health Clinics and provide targeted technical assistance to rural health clinics nationwide. To learn more about these conference calls, go to <http://www.hrsa.gov/ruralhealth/policy/confcall/index.html>.

The HRSA Office of Health Information Technology and Quality (OHITQ) also hosts technical assistance webinars to help HRSA grantees and safety net providers who are either using or planning to use health IT as a tool to improve quality in their delivery of patient care. For more information about these webinars, go to <http://www.hrsa.gov/healthit/toolbox/webinars.html>.

OHITQ recently published a Primer on HIT Adoption in the Rural Health Care Setting to provide guidance to rural critical access hospitals that wish to demonstrate meaningful use. You can download the Primer at <http://www.hrsa.gov/ruralhealth/pdf/meaningfuluseprimer.pdf>.



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## The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)

CMS engages in frequent outreach activities to educate the states on the Medicaid EHR Incentive Program, and to gather feedback from the states about the program. CMS hosts “All-States Calls” and has a number of educational materials available for download from its website, [http://www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms/40\\_MedicaidStateInfo.asp](http://www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms/40_MedicaidStateInfo.asp).

## Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality (AHRQ)

The AHRQ National Resource Center (NRC) is a public resource for sharing research findings, best practices, lessons learned, and funding opportunities with health IT researchers, implementers, and policymakers. More than 10,000 documents, presentations, articles, and tools are freely available at <http://www.healthit.ahrq.gov>.

## Indian Health Service (IHS)

IHS supports the national Telehealth Technology Assistance Center (T-TAC) by tracking changes in telehealth technologies, assessing these technologies, and providing technical assistance to grantees in the selection of strategies to optimally deliver telehealth clinical services. For more information, go to <http://www.telehealthtac.org/home>.

## Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

The FCC helps rural providers access affordable telecommunication services necessary for the adoption and meaningful use of health IT.

- The Rural Health Care program provides funding to eligible health care providers for telecommunications services, including broadband necessary for the provision of health care. The program is designed to ensure that rural providers pay no more than their urban counterparts for their telecommunications and Internet access needs in providing health care. For more information on this program, go to <http://www.fcc.gov/wcb/tapd/ruralhealth>.
- The FCC has also initiated a Rural Health Care Pilot Program to facilitate the creation of a nationwide broadband network dedicated to health care, connecting public and private nonprofit health care providers in rural and urban locations. For more information, go to <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/rural/rhcp.html>.

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The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology

HealthIT.gov



## U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

The USDA Rural Development Office has programs in place to help rural providers establish the infrastructure they need to adopt health IT and engage in the secure sharing of information—the cornerstone of meaningful use.

- The Rural Utilities Service provides programs to finance rural America's telecommunications infrastructure, including the Broadband Loan Program, the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program, the Community Connect Grant Program, and the Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan Program. For more information on these programs, go to <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/RUSTelecomPrograms.html>.
- The Community Programs provide grants to assist in the development of essential community facilities in rural areas; funds can be used to construct, enlarge, or improve community facilities for health care, public safety, and community and public services. For more information on these grants, go to [http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/HAD-CF\\_Grants.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/HAD-CF_Grants.html).

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## Need help finding grant opportunities or preparing grant applications?

- ONC has prepared a getting started Grants Primer, which highlights the key steps needed to find and apply for grants. The Primer can be downloaded here: <http://healthit.hhs.gov/grantsprimer>.
- The RAC website offers a listing of all health IT grant opportunities from Federal agencies. For more information, go to <http://www.raconline.org>.
- The State USDA Rural Development Offices also offer resources for grant-related information. To find the office for your state, go to [http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/recd\\_map.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/recd_map.html).

