

The Path to Interoperability



Interoperability is the ability of two or more systems to *exchange* health information and *use* the information once it is received.

It will take time for all types of health IT to be fully interoperable. HHS is seeking out opportunities to accelerate and promote the development of interoperability across the health care system. When we achieve interoperability and widespread exchange of information, providers will have the infrastructure to deliver patient-centered, value-driven care that improves health outcomes while reducing costs.

Achieving Interoperability Depends on 5 Elements

- 1) Adoption and Optimization
- 2) Standards
- 3) Financial and Clinical Incentives
- 4) Privacy and Security
- 5) Rules of Engagement

Adoption and Optimization of EHRs and HIE Services

To achieve interoperability, we must [adopt](#) and optimize electronic health records (EHRs) and health information exchange (HIE) services. Paper-based health records, which most doctors and hospitals used until recently, are usable only by one person at a time at a particular location. Electronic files allow information to be exchanged and used simultaneously and securely by authorized users from multiple locations, which is conducive to better coordination of care.

We have reached the tipping point – more than 50% of doctors and other clinicians as well as 80% of hospitals – have adopted and are meaningfully using health IT. Like EHRs, [health information exchange \(HIE\)](#) services must also be optimized, adopted, standardized and used by health care providers and their patients in order to advance interoperability. Lessons learned about high value use cases for exchange, such as automated [admission, discharge and transfer alerting](#), can help support adoption of HIE services in communities and states across the country.

Standards to Support Implementation and Certification

ONC works to accelerate standards adoption and use by:

- Convening standards implementers through the [Standards and Interoperability Framework](#) to develop shared, workable solutions to common information exchange challenges
- Providing support and testing tools for the software developer community to assist in developing standards-based, interoperable health IT systems through the [standards and implementation environment](#).
- Working with implementers to develop workable and scalable models for key exchange use cases, packaging needed standards, policies and work flows
- [Certifying health IT systems](#) against consensus standards so that providers using disparate, competing products can communicate. ONC Certified HIT products can be found on the [Certified Health IT Product List](#)

Financial and Clinical Incentives

The [Medicare and Medicaid EHR Incentive Programs](#) provide financial incentives to eligible providers for adopting and meaningfully using EHR, a critical first step.

HHS is working to ensure that [health information exchange](#) and enhance interoperability is advanced through multiple programs, resources, and other policy levers.

Interoperable health IT encompasses a wide variety of electronic tools that can help [clinicians](#):

- Access up-to-date evidence-based clinical guidelines.
- Provide better proactive health maintenance support to patients.
- Better coordinate patients' care with other care providers through secure and private sharing of clinical information.
- Engage patients to be part of the care team by implementing [Blue Button](#) capabilities that give patients access to their health information.

49 States Have Exchange Services

available to help providers make transitions of care safer and **more than 30 states** have services available to help providers look up patients' health information even if they are not sure where the patient previously received care.

Privacy and Security

Patients must trust their providers to keep health information safe and [secure](#), especially if it follows the patient to other points of care. HHS has taken steps to encourage and require EHR developers to build security into their products and ONC has included a number of security-related capabilities in the 2014 Edition Standards and Certification Criteria.

Privacy is a shared responsibility between all participants in the health delivery process including the government, developers, health plans, providers and patients.

Rules of Engagement

HHS has implemented a framework for defining and implementing nationwide trusted exchange that promotes good [governing](#) practices within and across communities.

The framework includes four categories of principles:

- Trust Principles: Guide health information exchange governance entities on patient privacy, meaningful choice, and data management in health information exchange
- Business Principles: Focus on responsible financial and operational policies for governance entities, with emphasis on transparency and health information exchange to keep the patients' best interests in mind
- Technical Principles: Express priorities for the use of standards in order to support the Trust and Business Principles as well as furthering the execution of interoperability
- Organizational Principles: Identify generally applicable approaches for good self-governance

To learn more about health IT and interoperability, visit our website at www.healthit.gov.