

Get the Facts about

# THE NATIONWIDE HEALTH INFORMATION NETWORK, DIRECT PROJECT, AND CONNECT SOFTWARE

The Office of the National Coordinator for  
Health Information Technology



*The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, establishes programs to improve health care quality, safety, and efficiency through the meaningful use of certified electronic health record (EHR) technology and secure health information exchange. Under HITECH, eligible health care professionals and hospitals can qualify for Medicare and Medicaid incentive payments when they adopt certified EHR technology and use it to achieve specified objectives.*

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) has provided funding for a number of health IT programs, including the development of the Nationwide Health Information Network—a set of standards, services, and policies that enable the secure exchange of health information over the Internet. This secure exchange will evolve into an essential part of using electronic health records.

These standards, services, and policies will help move health care from a system where patient information is stored in paper medical records and carried from one doctor's office to the next to a process where information is stored and shared securely and electronically. Health information will follow the patient and be available for clinical decision making as well as for uses beyond direct patient care, such as measuring quality of care.

The Nationwide Health Information Network is NOT a physical network that runs on servers at the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, nor is it a large network that stores patient records.

ONC is working with the federal Health Information Technology Policy Committee (HITPC) and HIT Standards Committee (HITSC) to explore policy and technical methods for enabling patient choice in health information exchange. The Office of the Chief Privacy Officer is working with ONC divisions to assure the integration of privacy into all facets of ONC activities and projects. In addition, ONC is working to ensure that the technical and policy foundations of the Nationwide Health Information Network will demonstrate methods for achieving trust among entities exchanging information while integrating best practices for privacy and security.

ONC federal advisory committees have been active in collecting information, deliberating on key issues, and making recommendations to the National Coordinator on measures related to security of health information exchange. ONC also embarked on a multi-phase cybersecurity program that includes an assessment of HIT risks and threats and the development of a multi-pronged approach to combating them. ONC also is collaborating with the President's cybersecurity initiative along with other federal partners to solicit input from the best security minds in the government on security best practices and standards.

Meaningful use requirements for Medicare and Medicaid incentive payments include measures to protect security and privacy, and ONC's interim final rule certification standards for EHRs includes the technical capabilities required to assure that information is adequately protected.

**Secure health information exchange, which is fundamental to the meaningful use of electronic health records, can help improve quality, safety, and efficiency of health care.**





## Nationwide Health Information Network Activities

The Nationwide Health Information Network Exchange, Direct Project, and CONNECT software solution are three initiatives launched to help expand secure health information exchange efforts using Nationwide Health Information Network standards.

## Nationwide Health Information Network Exchange

- **What it is:** A group of federal agencies and private organizations have come together to securely exchange electronic health information. These organizations are helping to develop Nationwide Health Information Network standards, services, and policies and are also currently demonstrating live health information exchange.
- **Why it is important:** These entities are able to send and retrieve electronic health information to support direct patient care, streamline benefit claims, and improve public health tracking.

## The Direct Project

- **What it is:** The Direct Project, launched in March 2010, is developing standards and services required to enable secure, directed health information exchange at a more local and less complex level among trusted providers in support of stage 1 Meaningful Use incentive requirements (e.g., a primary care provider sending a referral or care summary to a local specialist electronically, or a physician requesting lab tests electronically).
- **Why it is important:** This project will expand the existing Nationwide Health Information Network standards and services, within a policy framework, to enable the simple, direct, and secure transport of health information, between health care providers at the local level and their patients.

The Direct Project is complementary to the work of the Nationwide Health Information Network Exchange. Both models will be needed to support nationwide health information exchange.

## CONNECT

- **What it is:** CONNECT is a free, open source software solution that supports health information exchange – both locally and at the national level. CONNECT uses Nationwide Health Information Network standards, services, and policies to make sure that health information exchanges are compatible with other exchanges being set up throughout the country. CONNECT is the result of a unique collaboration among federal agencies that is coordinated through the Federal Health Architecture program under ONC.
- **Why it is important:** Now available for free to all organizations, CONNECT can be used to help set up health information exchanges and share data using nationally recognized interoperability standards. This software solution was initially developed by federal agencies to support their health-related missions.

## For More Information About:

The Nationwide Health Information Network, please visit, <http://healthit.hhs.gov/nhin>

The Direct Project, please visit, <http://www.directproject.org>

CONNECT, please visit, <http://connectopensource.org>

ONC, the HITECH Act, and other ONC initiatives, please visit, <http://healthit.gov>

The Medicare and Medicaid Electronic Health Records Incentive Programs, please visit, <http://www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms>

