

Background

In April 2004, the President called for widespread deployment of health information technology (HIT) within 10 years. Since then, both the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONCHIT) and the American Health Information Community (AHIC) have been established by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In an early ONCHIT report, broad goals for improving healthcare were set forth. One of the key actions listed to support those goals was *the private sector certification of health information technology products*.

A broad range of healthcare payers, from government to the private sector, is prepared to offer financial incentives for HIT adoption – but only if there is a mechanism to ensure the products are robust enough to deliver the anticipated benefits. Physicians note the uncertainty faced by them as EHR buyers – product suitability, quality, interoperability, and data portability are difficult to judge. A successful certification initiative has the potential to open up the flow of HIT incentives *and* simultaneously reduce the risk for HIT purchasers, acting as a catalyst to HIT adoption.

In response to this challenge, three HIT industry associations – AHIMA, HIMSS, and the Alliance – joined forces in July 2004 to launch the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT) as a *voluntary, private-sector initiative to certify HIT products*. The three committed resources to support the Commission during its organizational phase.

In September 2005, HHS awarded CCHIT a three year contract to develop and evaluate certification criteria and an inspection process for EHRs in three areas – ambulatory EHRs, inpatient EHRs, and the infrastructure components through which they interoperate.

Mission

CCHIT's purpose is to create an efficient, credible, sustainable mechanism for the certification of healthcare information technology products.

The goals of product certification are:

- To reduce the risk of HIT investment by providers,
- To ensure interoperability of HIT products with emerging local and national health information infrastructures,
- To enhance the availability of HIT incentives from public and private purchasers/payers, and
- To accelerate the adoption of robust, interoperable HIT throughout the US healthcare system.

Stakeholders

CCHIT's primary stakeholders are providers purchasing HIT products; vendors developing products; and purchasers or payers offering incentives for adoption. Other important groups include safety net providers, healthcare consumers, public health agencies, quality improvement organizations, clinical researchers, standards development and informatics experts, and government agencies. CCHIT and its volunteer workgroups strive to fairly represent the interests of these diverse groups in an open fashion, communicating the progress of its work frequently.

Timeline

CCHIT focused its first efforts on ambulatory EHR products and is on track to start commercial certification in March 2006. The first EHR product certifications are expected by June 2006.

Roadmap

CCHIT works in a dynamic environment, collaborating within the HHS and AHIC communities. Many standards are just gaining consensus, while standards for interoperability are at an earlier stage of development. CCHIT must be prepared to develop initial certification criteria that evolve considerably, along with the standards, from year to year. CCHIT plans to provide leadership to the industry by developing a forward-looking roadmap, offering standards development organizations a timeline to work against as well as providing vendors a guide for their own development plans. For more about CCHIT's work and how to participate, go to www.cchit.org.