

# Health IT Grants Aim to Help Doctors Boot Up

BY JOYCE FRIEDEN

The White House is trying to get health care workers ready to help physicians in computerizing their medical records.

Nearly \$1 billion in American Reinvestment and Recovery Act awards will be made to help health care providers become “meaningful users” of health information technology and to train other allied health professionals for careers in health IT. Jobs created will include nurses, pharmacy technicians, and IT technicians and trainers, according to Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and Labor Secretary Hilda Solis.

“These investments will serve to train almost 50,000 workers in Department of Labor programs plus thousands more hired for HHS regional extension centers in the months ahead,” Jared Bernstein, chief economist to Vice President Joseph Biden, said in a teleconference. “By providing seed capital, we are helping to seed an emerging industry that will cre-

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ate new jobs well after the Recovery Act has ended.”

Under the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, a part of the 2009 federal stimulus law, physicians who treat Medicare patients can receive up to \$44,000 over 5 years for the meaningful use of a certified health information system. Those whose patient populations are made up of at least 30% Medicaid patients can earn up to \$64,000 in incentive payments for their use of the technology.

The proposed regulations include a definition of meaningful use and outline other criteria for obtaining the full incentive payments.

The awards include over \$750 million in HHS grants. Of that, \$386 million will go to 40 states to help develop state-level health information exchanges (HIE), and another \$375 million will be awarded to 32 nonprofit organizations to support the development of regional extension centers (REC), which will aid providers in using health IT. Additional HIE and REC awards will be announced soon.

The grants will make it easier for physicians who are just getting started with electronic health records, Ms. Sebelius said in an interview. “The people who will be trained by the grants ... will actually provide the kind of hands-on technical support we think providers need to make this transition. It’s not just that the Act gives physicians financial incentives to buy a computer and plug it in; we understand the steps along the way of reorganizing workflow and retraining

staff that are going to require hands-on support. So the money going out is to establish an on-the-ground program for that kind of personal technical assistance and help.”

Ms. Sebelius noted that the grants are particularly targeted toward smaller providers “who haven’t waded into the area before. This is an incredibly important part of making this transition.”

In December, the HHS issued a pro-

posed regulation defining “meaningful use” and explaining how providers can meet the criteria. In response to a question about physician concerns that the regulation is too complex, Dr. David Blumenthal, national coordinator for health information technology, noted that the regulations are still only a proposal.

“We are very anxious to hear what the physician community has to say about it and the ways in which they feel it needs

to be changed,” he said in an interview. “As an internist, I had to go through the process of learning how to use an electronic health record, and I know it’s not easy, but we’re going to be providing support nationwide.” ■

For more information, see [www.hhs.gov/news/press/2010pres/02/20100212a.html](http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2010pres/02/20100212a.html) and [edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/E9-31217.pdf](http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/E9-31217.pdf).

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