

Initiative to Release Medicare, Public Health Data

BY JANE ANDERSON

A new Open Government initiative unveiled by the Health and Human Services department April 7 aims to create more transparency at the giant federal health agency, improve accountability, and make large quantities of raw Medicare and public health data available to the public.

A separate transparency project at the Food and Drug Administration was announced during the same public webcast, as was a beta-test version of a new data dashboard for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (www.cms.gov/Dashboard).

One of the biggest components of the HHS plan is the release of raw public health data.

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we do and hold us accountable, help the public hold the private sector accountable, increase awareness of health and human services issues, generate insights into how to improve health and well-being, spark public and private sector innovation and action, and provide the basis for new products and services that can benefit the American people," HHS officials wrote in the plan.

The project will make various data sets public so that state and local governments, researchers, and others can use it to analyze public health trends and create novel applications, said Todd Park, HHS chief technology officer.

"We have a lot of data showing how we're doing on obesity, smoking, access to healthy foods," Mr. Park said during a webcast launching the project. "We're going to take all that data, make sure it doesn't compromise patient privacy, and then release it."

Mr. Park said he is "100% confident" that users outside government will take the data and "come up with better ideas than we would ever have for it."

For example, he said he could envision "social networking games to help advise a lot of folks on what's going on in community health and how to improve it." He added that the agency is sponsoring the HHS Apps Challenge, which is a public competition for the best applications built using the data.

The CMS already has uploaded an improved user interface and analytical tool for viewing existing CMS COMPARE data on quality performance for hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies, and dialysis centers, HHS officials said during the webcast.

The CMS plans to publish detailed Medicaid State Plan documents and amendments online at the CMS Web site by the end of 2010, and will release previously unpublished national, state, regional, and possibly county-level data on Medicare prevalence of disease, quality, costs, and service utilization as part of HHS's Community Health Data Initiative.

As part of the overall Open Government initiative, the FDA also launched a

new dashboard that, when fully implemented, will allow the public to track some 300 performance measures and 80 key projects across more than 90 FDA program offices on an ongoing basis, Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, FDA principal deputy commissioner, said during the webcast.

The public will be able to use the dashboard, located at www.fda.gov/fdatrack, to "see the progress that each office is making toward its goals," he

said. For example, measures might include how many generic drugs are waiting to be reviewed, and progress in tracking contaminated foods, he said.

"In the past, agencies had been measured by some broad overall measures," Dr. Sharfstein said. "Our measures are monthly, there are many more of them, and they're really targeted. People will be able to go online and see our progress." ■

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