



White paper
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East Kern County Integrated Technology Association: A HIT Vehicle for Rural, Small and Underserved Communities

Background

The East Kern County Integrated Technology Association (“EKCITA”) was formed via a federal research initiative and through a grassroots community effort. Based in Tehachapi, California, the purpose of EKCITA is to demonstrate secure and appropriate sharing of electronic health files and clinical data for the purpose of public health, patient care, and research; and to develop, improve, and assist in the implementation of health information technology for all physicians, caregivers, health-related institutions and consumers in, but not limited to, SE Kern.

EKCITA is not a typical Regional Health Information Organization (“RHIO”) in that it also holds the licenses for the electronic health record (“EHR”) software solutions installed at various rural health clinics and private practices in the region; holds the license for a custom designed, web-based personal health record (“PHR”); and is responsible for the open source health information exchange (“HIE”) system designed by the local providers. EKCITA’s HIE will allow for not only the secure transmission of data, but will also support population based quality improvement and research studies.

At this time, EKCITA is comprised of a local critical access hospital, medical group, 6 private provider offices, and 3 rural health clinics. EKCITA is exchanging patient demographic information, encounter data, lab results, radiology transcription reports, and medication and allergy lists. The functionality of EKCITA’s HIE is growing on a daily basis as lessons are learned to improve its process.

Issue

As a result of President Obama signing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (“ARRA”) on February 17, 2009, healthcare providers who serve a designated proportion of Medicare and/or Medicaid patients are qualified to receive incentive payments as early as 2011 for the “meaningful use” of electronic health records. Providers include hospitals, individual physicians and mid-level practitioners, medical groups, and community health centers in rural or urban locales. As a gross overview, the meaningful use of electronic health records entails having and using the following features of the electronic health record system: computer physician order entry (“CPOE”), decision support, quality management, and participating in health information exchange.

Also, the ARRA provides stimulus dollars to the state to bolster HIE projects. Those that are considered to be “shovel ready” will receive more funding or an implementation grant compared to those that are not “shovel ready” and would receive funds for planning. What “shovel ready” implies is that implementation for the entire state is covered, including the “white spaces;” the traditionally more difficult areas to address issues of access, quality, and outcomes. California

has multiple HIE initiatives underway, but few that are considered truly operational and only one that is based in a rural region. That one being EKCITA, has been recognized at both Federal and State levels for its efficiency and effectiveness.

Rural, small, and underserved communities face unique challenges in developing and implementing EHRs and HIE and yet now must overcome these challenges if they expect to receive the substantial financial incentives provided via ARRA. These communities will encounter more difficulties in mobilizing resources such as legal documents, education, software, and etc to develop an exchange network that is built on trust.

Concept to Address Problem

EKCITA is a model HIE for rural, small and underserved communities who are interested in engaging their community to exchange patient clinical data and utilize that data in a meaningful way for purposes of population health research and quality improvement initiatives. EKCITA has spent three years undergoing corporate structuring, developing governance, and finessing work flow to better fit the providers' practice needs. Under the management services of Believe Health, LLC, EKCITA would offer guidance to organizations, communities, and regions on making decisions on entering the HIE highway.

Believe Health, LLC is comprised of a team possessing a specific set of knowledge towards rural, small and underserved communities. The core team has been involved with planning, directing, coordinating, and implementing two AHRQ grants regarding HIT; and has gained invaluable experience implementing EKCITA's HIE. The proposition is to expand EKCITA's network, affording other rural, small, and/or underserved areas to participate in a health information exchange for the purposes of enhancing the quality, safety, and continuum of care for patients to be eligible of receiving incentive payments allotted by the ARRA.

Next Steps

EKCITA is holding an educational summit to educate healthcare organization executives regarding "What the ARRA Means to You." It is imperative that providers understand the opportunities and requirements for the incentive payments for the meaningful use of electronic health records; and to engage with an HIE supporting the state of California efforts of receiving implementation funds.

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