

Putting People to Work in Health IT – Fast

By Patricia Dombrowski, MA, and Robert A. Kaye, MD, MS

If the adoption of electronic health records takes off in hospitals and ambulatory clinician offices as the Obama administration hopes, there will be a huge demand for new workers trained in health IT. David Blumenthal, MD, national coordinator for health IT, estimated in October 2009 over 50,000 new jobs would be needed. Considering the tight line created by the ARRA legislation, the task of educating all of these people will be enormous.

A broad spectrum of training programs will be required. Some technicians, analysts and implementation specialists will be trained at community colleges in programs as brief as six months. Most health IT roles will require at least a two-year associate degree to provide students with adequate background and skills in both healthcare and IT to perform effectively in the workplace. More complex training at the bachelor's or graduate level will be needed for mid- and high-level management positions. Students with prior experience in healthcare-related fields will have an advantage.

At a time when many higher education budgets are decimated, the \$124 million in the Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) awards is a lone, bright light for college health IT program builders. The funding intent is to train a minimum of 10,500 health IT workers in community colleges in six broad categories: practice workflow and information management redesign specialists; clinician/practitioner consultants; implementation support specialists; implementation managers; technical/software support staff; and trainers. These programs are targeted towards learners with an IT or healthcare background, and are completed in six months or less. Universities will offer baccalaureate and master's degrees and advanced certificates in higher level health IT roles; the number of graduates from these programs is not specified.

[ONC's workforce effort](#) is funded with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars. The emphasis is on putting people to work in health IT – fast. Community colleges have just two years to absorb funding, staff projects, deploy new curricula, train learners and place them into employment. Once beyond the 24-month finish line, many of these institutions will find they have been pulled out of a single focus on medical records and coding, and into the arena of emerging health technologies. Faculty will be attuned to the sector, partnerships with employers will be in place, and the community will be accustomed to looking to community colleges for these programs. Natural concentrations, such as ambulatory practice office manager training, professional development in IT for nurses, technicians and therapists, and healthcare project management programs can flourish at two-year colleges, in the post-stimulus era.

There will also be a tremendous need to train clinicians to effectively and safely use electronic health records (EHRs). With the low adoption rate of EHRs by practicing clinicians, very few of these providers have had experience using electronic records. Advanced training will be needed to implement more complicated applications such as

clinical documentation, alerts, clinical decision support and data mining. Experience has shown clinician input is essential to the successful implementation of these health IT systems.

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