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November 16, 2006

Mass. Towns Take Another I.T. Step

(October 24, 2006) Two communities in Massachusetts participating in a pilot program to implement electronic medical records software in physician offices have selected a vendor to build separate health data exchanges.

Brockton and Newburyport will use the interoperability hub software of Wellogic Inc., Cambridge, Mass. The communities and a third--North Adams--are using a \$50 million commitment from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts to fund EMRs for physician practices, and then link the practices with hospitals, laboratories and other providers in each community. The eventual goal is to link these communities--and others--to Massachusetts' emerging regional health information organization, called MA-SHARE.

Four EMR vendors are implementing their products in physician offices in Brockton and Newburyport. Physicians in North Adams selected a single vendor, eClinicalWorks Inc. of Westborough, Mass., which also will supply that town's interoperability hub.

Two years after the initiative to wire up doctors at the community level began, about 35% of practices in the three communities have implemented and are using EMRs, says Micky Tripathi, president and CEO at the Massachusetts eHealth Collaborative, which is administering the initiative.

The pilot programs run through July 2008. Tripathi is confident that the Blues plan's funding commitment will provide sufficient resources through the period. Massachusetts BCBS is the only source of money for the collaborative, but it has received in-kind support, such as staff and office space, from the Massachusetts Medical Society, Partners HealthCare System and other stakeholders. "We haven't asked anyone else for additional money," he adds.

That soon could change. Getting an initial group of physicians up and running on EMRs was the first phase of the pilot program. The interoperability hubs are the second phase. The collaborative in the third phase will analyze data to determine if the community initiatives have brought enough value to physicians and insurers to justify the investment.

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But the collaborative also will start looking for new funding to expand to other communities before the initial pilot program ends, Tripathi says. Proponents also will work on a sustainable funding plan to expand the community model statewide.

More information on the Massachusetts eHealth Collaborative is available at maehc.org.

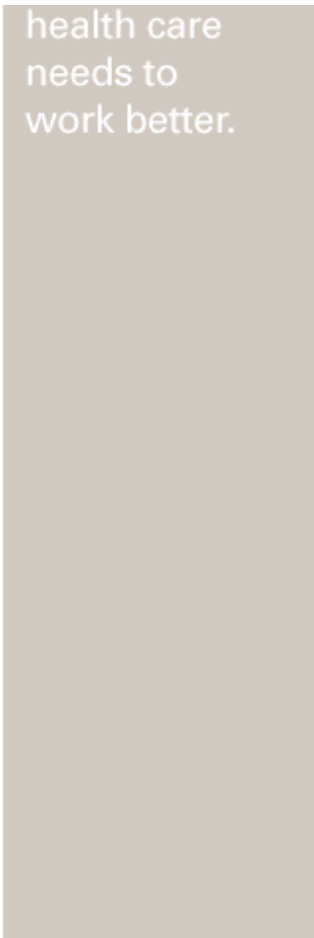
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