



Summary of the ONC's proposed plan for establishing regional centers

On May 28, 2009, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) issued a notice and request for comments on its proposed plan for the establishment of regional centers to assist health care providers in selecting and implementing certified electronic health records (EHRs). The ONC proposed plan sets forth services that the centers would be expected to provide, funding that would be available and a proposed timeline for the ONC to make awards to selected regional center applicants. The ONC's proposed plan is not a solicitation for applicants to serve as regional centers—the call for applications will be made at a later time, once the ONC has considered comments to its proposal.

Upon award, the regional centers would become members of a consortium coordinated and facilitated by the Health Information Technology Research Center (HITRC). This consortium would be established by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, as specified under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The HITRC is charged with researching and analyzing best practices regarding health information technology (HIT) utilization, and the regional centers are required to disseminate and implement best practices learned from the HITRC.

ARRA calls on regional centers to provide assistance and education to all providers in a region, but to first prioritize any direct assistance to the following:

- Public or not-for-profit hospitals or critical access hospitals
- Federally qualified health centers (as defined in section 1861(aa)(4) of the Social Security Act)
- Entities that are located in rural and other areas that serve uninsured, underinsured and medically underserved individuals (regardless of whether such area is urban or rural)
- Individual or small group practices (or a consortium thereof) that are primarily focused on primary care

Regional centers would be responsible for furnishing direct, individualized and on-site assistance, as needed, to individual providers. Such assistance would be a key service offered by regional centers and would represent a significant portion of the regional centers' activities. It would be prioritized by the statute for direct assistance.

It is also expected that each regional center would provide technical assistance within a defined geographic area, and that each area would be served by only one center. At a minimum, the support should consist of materials that can be widely and rapidly disseminated, both for provider self-study and for use by entities other than regional centers that have an interest and the ability to provide assistance and information to those providers adopting HIT.

All regional centers would be evaluated to ensure they meet the needs of the health care providers in their geographic area that is consistent with specified statutory objectives. Lessons learned from these efforts would be exchanged across regional centers and with other stakeholders, including but not limited to other federal programs, to promote the availability of effective support to providers across the nation. In addition, all regional centers would be expected to use the learned information to guide their internal self-evaluation and ongoing improvement processes.



As specified in ARRA, the criteria for determining qualified applicants requires “regional centers to be affiliated with any United States–based nonprofit organization, or group thereof, that applies and is awarded financial assistance.” The ONC has proposed the following additional criteria and preference criteria for awarding grants to regional centers:

Additional required criteria would include:

- Define the geographic region and the provider population within that region it proposes to serve
- Describe proposed levels and approaches of support for prioritized and other providers to be served
- Address how the applicant would structure its organization and staffing to enable providers served to have ready access to reasonably local HIT “extension agents”; provide training and ongoing support for these critical workers
- Demonstrate the capacity to facilitate and support cooperation among local providers, health systems, communities and health information exchanges
- Demonstrate that the applicant is able to meet the needs of providers prioritized for direct assistance
- Propose an efficient and feasible strategy to broadly furnish specialized expertise in such areas as organizational development, legal issues, privacy and security, economic and financing issues, and evaluation to all providers served
- Show an intensive, individualized “local” presence from an interdisciplinary extension agent to smaller groups of providers assigned to individual agents

Preference criteria would include:

- Preference would be given to proposed regional center organizational plans and implementation strategies incorporating multi-stakeholder collaborations that leverage local resources. These might include public and/or private universities with health professions, informatics and allied health programs; state or regional medical/professional societies and other provider organizations, federally recognized state primary care associations; state or regional hospital organizations; large health centers and networks of rural and/or community health centers; other relevant health professional organizations; the regionally relevant state Area Health Education Center(s); health information exchange organizations serving providers in the region; the Medicare Quality Improvement Organization(s) serving providers that the proposed regional center aims to serve; state and tribal government entities in the center’s geographic service area including, but not limited to, public health agencies, libraries and information centers with health professional and community outreach programs, and consumer/patient organizations.
- Preference would be given to applicants identifying viable sources of matching funds. However, the ONC proposes not to require matching funds for awards made in fiscal year 2010.

The ONC proposes to issue awards as early as the first quarter of fiscal year 2010 through the fourth quarter of 2010, with an average award value of \$1 million to \$2 million per regional center (with a maximum of \$10 million per regional center). A series of proposal deadlines will be set so that well-prepared applicants can begin work sooner, and those applicants requiring further organization will have more time to prepare.