NACCHO
National Association of County & City Health Officials
*The National Connection for Local Public Health*

**Testimony on the Definition of 'Meaningful Use' of Health Information Technology**
**Submitted to the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics**
**Executive Subcommittee**

**April 30, 2009**

## Introduction

- The National Association of County & City Health Officials (NACCHO) is the national organization representing local health departments (LHDs). NACCHO supports efforts that protect and improve the health of all people and all communities by promoting national policy, developing resources and programs, seeking health equity, and supporting effective local public health practice and systems. NACCHO serves the nearly 3,000 local health departments across the U.S. that have a vested interest in helping to fulfill the promise of a nationwide health information network (NHIN).

## Background

- The motivation for development of electronic health records (EHRs) and health information exchanges (HIE) is often to reduce the cost of health care and improve outcomes in clinical medicine. Yet HIEs and access to HIT can also transform public health to meet future information needs and provide benefits for both clinical and public heath practitioners.
- Public health can help the clinical sector by using health measures (with data originating in the EHR) to assess the extent to which chronic disease occurs in the community; the extent to which patients are not managed in accordance with clinical practice guidelines; and disparities in health care delivered to low-income or racial/ethnic minorities. EHRs document clinician practices in ordering tests and educating patients, providing insight into whether lack of provider action or patient action is the cause for adverse health status. This informs public health action—e.g., to focus resources on providing additional patient health education. If a comprehensive Nationwide Health Information Network is to be established, the need for simultaneous investments in public health must be considered and addressed in order to accrue these benefits.
- In its 2005 *National Profile of Local Health Departments*, NACCHO found that only 29% of LHDs had implemented electronic medical records. LHDs must be able to harness the potential of integrated systems with clinical and public health providers.
- LHDs also deliver primary care to the uninsured and other vulnerable populations. Use of EHRs will strengthen their ability to address health disparities and improve quality of care and develop appropriate interventions to improve population health.
- Electronic health information exchange involving patients, professional providers, and lay providers offers a new field in which public health and its partners can mount a new generation of primary and secondary prevention programs. Assuring that this objective is supported by the definition of meaningful use is therefore important.

**A definition of "meaningful use" of HIT as it pertains to public health requires:**

- Bi-directional exchange of health information between local and state health departments and clinical care entities
- All electronic health record implementations certified by the Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT) should meet the standards most directly relevant to establishing interoperability for interchange of data and information between clinical and public health information systems, such as those for bio-surveillance, disease surveillance and outbreak management, immunizations, and laboratory data interchange for reportable diseases.
- Interoperable exchange with professional care and behavioral health information systems. LHDs work with a plethora of community partners, many of which address the needs of vulnerable populations including the uninsured, and those in schools and jails. Health outcomes will be improved for everyone in the community if these sectors adopt interoperable EHRs and participate in HIE.
- Supports exchange with members of the public and lay providers of care integrated with professional care. This type of exchange is essential for health improvement programs that seek to support an integrated approach to health.

**Justification: Why these uses are important to include as a requirement and how these uses improve the population's health.**

- The definition of meaningful use must be intentionally designed to provide public health with the full range of data and reports needed to assess, prevent and act on threats to the public's health.
- If the definition of meaningful use is inclusive of public health, the potential exists to improve the response to emergencies and outbreaks.
- The definition must support exchange with patients and their lay care givers integrated with their professional providers in order to incentivize primary and secondary prevention programs. The current swine (H1N1) flu outbreak offers a stark example of the need for timely data and information exchange among these parties that can be analyzed and acted upon by public health officials, allowing constant tracking of clusters of symptoms or illness.

**Conclusion:**

- Including public health uses within the definition of meaningful use of EHR data assures effectiveness of public health first responders in disasters; provides the data to immunize vulnerable populations against infectious disease; prevents costly and unnecessary hospitalizations; sets the stage for a sorely needed set of primary and secondary prevention programs, and helps prepare community organizations, senior centers, schools and healthcare professionals for public health emergencies.