

*Questions about EHRs and how to make them a cost-effective part of your practice?
We have good news: Help is on the way—both technical and financial!*

Alaska's EHR champions help guide providers across the digital divide

September 29, 2010

As many of us know, changes associated with technology in the way we do business can be time-consuming, frustrating, and expensive. Make that doubly so for medical practices and clinics, with their complex medical procedures, patient histories and records, security and privacy issues, and billing systems.

But in spite of some understandable tech-phobia on the part of many, Alaska's healthcare provider community is moving toward the benefits of Electronic Health Records (EHRs), largely through the efforts of two champion organizations formed to help guide them across the digital divide: The Alaska EHR Alliance (the "Alliance") formed in 2005 (www.aehra.org), and its partner organization the Alaska e-Health Network (AeHN) (ak-ehealth.org) formed in 2008.

These two organizations now work together to help answer questions and clear the confusion about EHR issues, with the ultimate goal of developing a Health Information Exchange (HIE) network aimed at improving the healthcare infrastructure throughout Alaska. Benefits of EHR systems include improved quality of care through timely access to essential medical information; improved patient safety through reduction of medical errors; reduced healthcare costs through electronic billing, charts, and decreased paperwork and admin costs; and greater privacy and security of patient records.

State and federal legislation have provided fortuitous reinforcement of AeHN's and the Alliance's efforts, including the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This Act provides financial incentives to help providers adopt EHRs, including more than \$2 billion from Medicare and Medicaid to those organizations that are making "meaningful use" of an electronic health record starting in 2011.

Using a carrot-and-stick approach, the Act will also penalize late adopters of electronic health records by cutting their Medicare reimbursement for each year that implementation is delayed, beginning with a 1% cut in 2015, up to a 5 % maximum, thereby adding pressure for timely completion.

Technical and financial assistance now available

To help Alaska's providers understand and achieve "meaningful use" specified in the federal legislation, AeHN opened **Alaska's Regional Extension Center (REC)** early this fall. One of 60 federally funded RECs across the US, Alaska's REC offers technical and strategic services to assist Alaska's healthcare providers adopt and implement EHRs so that they can meet the "meaningful use" standards required for federal financial incentives of up to \$44,000 through Medicare and \$63,500 through Medicaid for qualified providers. (For eligibility status, go to <http://www.cms.gov/EHRIncentivePrograms>).

REC services are available to all providers, but offers a subsidy of up to \$3,000 in services to "eligible providers," those in primary care practices with ten or fewer providers. Services REC offers include EHR

readiness assessment, EHR vendor selection assistance, and IT support. For more information, contact Jim Landon, REC director: jim@ak-ehealth.org, 888-966-9030 ext 4.

AeHN is sponsoring a special, half-day workshop to provide more information to interested providers: "From EHRs to Meaningful Use Workshop," Friday, November 19, 2010, 8am-1:30pm BP Energy Center, Anchorage. Registration \$50; late registration \$75 after Oct 20. Register online: www.ak-ehealth.org or call 866-966-9030 ext 4

In 2009, the Alliance conducted an EHR usage survey among Alaska providers that showed that one of the top barriers to adopting an EHR was the difficulty deciding which EHR to choose. Earlier this year, after a rigorous 8-month due-diligence process, the Alliance selected two fully-endorsed EHR solution providers for the State of Alaska, [e-MDs](http://www.e-mds.com) (<http://www.e-mds.com>) and [Greenway Medical Technologies](http://www.greenwaymedical.com) (<http://www.greenwaymedical.com>), as two preferred EHR vendors for Alaska providers. The EHR selection project was funded by the Alaska eHealth Network through a grant from the State of Alaska. This endorsement offers Alaska providers access to preferred pricing and pre-negotiated contracts to simplify the EHR selection process. In addition, two hospitals are now offering ERHs to affiliated providers at reduced rates: Providence is offering Epic; and Central Peninsula Hospital, eClinical Works.

Moving Toward Statewide Health Information Exchange—Alaska's digital superhighway

In February 2009, Alaska took a giant step toward a statewide health information exchange when AeHN awarded a contract to GCI, the largest telecommunications provider in Alaska, to help develop an "Alaska e-health network" for telehealth and health information exchange.

The network will become the statewide superhighway for securely moving Electronic Health Records (EHRs) and related health care information, connecting health care providers across the state for safer, less expensive health care services. A \$10.5 million grant from the Federal Communications Commission Rural Health Pilot Program funded the contract. In April of this year, the state of Alaska selected the AeHN as Alaska's official health information exchange management entity.

"While some of Alaska's providers and their patients have already benefitted from limited-scale EHR systems, the designation of a single, statewide network will allow exponential improvement in secure, efficient information exchange, which ultimately benefits the health of all Alaskans," said Paul Sherry, President of AeHN's board of directors. "Our vision is an interoperable network of EHRs for providers in Alaska with the ability to connect to a nationwide, interoperable network. This designation is another great leap forward that builds momentum for reaching our goal—healthy Alaskans."

Ultimately, Alaska's EHR champions—the Alaska eHealth Network and the Alaska EHR Alliance--hope to help providers understand that "meaningful use" of the new electronic system is really all about patient safety and healthy Alaskans. A comprehensive system of effective EHRs will result in reduction of medical errors, and increases in quality of care and overall clinical efficiency. An added EHR benefit will be patient access to their own records, enabling a better patient-provider partnership in their own healthcare.

One of the Alliance's earliest members includes Ben Tisdale, a retired businessman who brings a patient's perspective to EHRs. Ben is now legally blind due to a medication error that could have been avoided had his physicians used EHRs. "An error was made giving me a medication that interacted with one of my existing

medications,” he said. “Had EHR’s with their medicine alerts, been available, I would have my sight today.” A strong supporter of EHR’s, Ben serves on the Alliance board of directors.

Other Alliance members include its board president, Dr. Jerome List, MD, a practicing physician and long-time EHR user and champion, as well as other physicians, representatives from provider organizations, medical insurers, and community members.

AeHN members include representatives from a wide range of organizations with healthcare interests, ranging from key hospitals to providers to AARP, and including the University of Alaska, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Alaska Primary Care Association, the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association, the VA, insurers, and business leaders.

For more information, or to become a member, contact:

Alaska eHealth network: www.ak-ehealth.org

Alaska EHR Alliance: www.aehra.org

Alaska REC: jim@ak-ehealth.org

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