

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Are Federal Training Programs Meeting the Growing Need for a New Health IT Workforce?

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I'm Kelly Wilkinson with a look at whether federal training programs are meeting the ever-expanding need for skilled health IT workers. This is a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation.

[According to a recent survey](#), the most significant barrier to implementing health IT is lack of staff. The survey was conducted by the not-for-profit Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, or HIMSS.

It's the first time in more than a decade that health care organizations did not identify funding as the key barrier to health IT implementation.

The federal government has invested millions of dollars to develop a skilled workforce, in part by creating training programs for IT workers to help health care providers make the shift to electronic health records.

Tim Andrews is a vice president for Booz Allen Hamilton, serving on the consulting company's health team. He says there's no way to make the jump to adopting an EHR system without a staffing crunch.

(Andrews): "The technology can be sold quickly. In a day you can write the check. But to create people who have this level of skill and understanding, just, you know it's just not going to go this fast. So it will be, I think the biggest bottleneck."

Andrews says the staffing challenges are not uniform. For instance, providers need staff to implement new IT systems. And they need staff to change the workflow once those systems are installed. Andrews says those aren't necessarily the same skills.

(Andrews): "Sometimes the same people can do them but often times not, because to do the first task is really quite technical. I need to know, you know, what does your systems look like, what do your data center look like, how does this product work, what are the configuration buttons if you will on it. It's a very specific set of skills. This other set of skills is, I need to understand this clinical institution and how they work. And I need to work with their clinical people and then work with the technical people to understand how to try and

redesign their processes -- literally their workflows as we call them, in order to actually gain the benefit of this technology that's now been installed."

Andrews says workforce development programs should include more on-the-job training with service organizations and institutions so newly minted health IT workers can hit the ground running.

As staffing needs accelerate, hospitals and providers say they're competing with vendors and consulting firms for top talent. Which Andrews says is inevitable.

(Andrews): "Everybody's competing with everybody else because that's what happens when there's so little talent for such a crucial set of activities that are time-bound."

Helen Figge is senior director of career services for HIMSS. She says that for hospitals to remain competitive, they should look at the entire worker, including transferable skills.

(Figge): "There are definitely people out there who have skills that we need in health care IT today that could be tapped into with just maybe a little bit more mentoring, coaching, education."

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT funded the Workforce Development Program to train health IT professionals. That program is made up of four separate initiatives, ranging from setting up health IT programs at universities to developing curriculum, administering competency exams and training workers through community college programs.

Norma Morganti is executive director of the Midwest Community College Health IT Consortium -- one of five regional groups across the country that received funding from the 2009 federal economic stimulus package to create and expand health IT training programs at community colleges.

She says at the program's inception, providers and vendors scrambled to figure out how they would meet the requirements of the meaningful use program. She said most organizations were hiring IT staff away from other institutions to help meet that goal.

But then, she said, there was a shift.

(Morganti): "As time moved on, we started to notice that many of these organizations started to hear the message that we were training mid-career professionals that had many years of experience in health care or IT. Many of them came to us with bachelor's or master's degrees and many years of experience."

Morganti says the program has trained almost two thousand students in the Midwest.

(Morganti): "Myself and other leads under the direction of the Office of the National Coordinator are really trying to work on a national level to expand our understanding of what the employers are looking for and share that experience so others that are looking at getting into this field and developing training programs have some guidance."

A spokesperson from ONC says almost 10,000 community college students have completed a federally supported health IT training program, and more than 8,000 of those graduates are currently in the workforce.

Tim Andrews of Booz Allen Hamilton says there will be a threshold where staffing challenges ease up.

(Andrews): "It's like, you know, pushing a big rubber ball up a hill, can't see when you get to the top, you don't know whether you're a foot from the top or a mile from the top. So it's hard to predict how long it will take us to get to that point where we really have a large enough workforce to really begin to draw in people more easily and really satisfy the demands more easily."

This has been a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at iHB@CHCF.org. I'm Kelly Wilkinson. Thanks for listening.