

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Community Colleges, Universities Charge Ahead To Address Health IT Work Force Shortage

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I'm Mina Kim with a look at how federal efforts to boost the number of health IT professionals through university and community college training programs are making progress as the industry faces a health IT work force shortage. This is a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

Last year, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT doled out \$84 million in grants to universities and community colleges to turn out more professionals trained in health IT. In January, it announced another \$80 million for community colleges and other work force development programs. The U.S. needs an estimated 50,000 more health IT workers to help hospitals and physician practices achieve meaningful use of electronic health records.

Oregon Health and Science University is one of the work force grant recipients. It will train 150 students by 2013 in its biomedical informatics graduate programs. William Hersh, professor and chair of OHSU's Department of Medical Informatics and Clinical Epidemiology, says the university is already two-thirds of the way there and will graduate its first cohort this summer. He says that students enrolled under the training grant get financial assistance and that demand for the program has soared.

(Hersh): "We've had about three to four times as many qualified applicants apply for the funding as we have positions available in the training grant, which means that unfortunately there's a lot of highly qualified people that we can't support with the training grant. Although they are free to -- if they are accepted into the program, which most of them are -- be self-funded students."

OHSU is one of nine universities to receive ONC's university-based training grant. Hersh had to hire more faculty and staff for the program, but says scaling up hasn't been a problem since OHSU has had a biomedical informatics graduate program for ten years.

(Hersh): "Some of the university based training programs have been starting from scratch, and it's been a challenge for them to really

ramp up their programs. For us, this is sort of an incremental, significant incremental increase in our enrollment"

OHSU also received federal money to develop curriculum for health IT programs at community colleges. ONC's Community College Consortia funds 84 community colleges nationwide to develop short-term health IT programs. Hersh says the university scrambled to disseminate an initial draft curriculum last fall and is working to release a revised version in May. OHSU also serves as the program's National Training and Dissemination Center and provides technical assistance to community colleges as they roll out their courses.

(Hersh): "My understanding is they are doing pretty well. I believe that they've enrolled about 3,000 people in the first maybe six to eight months."

ONC's goal is that by 2012, the community colleges are collectively training more than 10,000 health IT workers annually. Atlanta Technical College is responsible for turning out 300 of them. Thomas Shlala, health IT grant program coordinator for Atlanta Technical College, says it's on pace to meet that goal, but it was slow going at first. Students must have a background in either health care or IT. Shlala says only a handful of qualified students enrolled in January and February, then in March, 120 students signed up.

(Shlala): "Once we started the marketing, and we're really at the start of our intensive marketing, then we were able to draw people in, but it's taken a focus of a few of us to get this really going."

Shlala says his biggest concern now is the health IT competency exam. ONC funded the development of a series of competency examinations for students in the community college programs. Shlala says he's received little information about it so far.

(Shlala): "We'd like to know what the exam's going to be like and be able to tell our students about it. The first exam probably will be in September and that's about all we know right now."

The exam is being co-developed by Northern Virginia Community College and the American Health Information Management Association. David Falkenstein is project director for federally funded grants at Northern Virginia Community College. He says beta versions of exams for six types of health IT roles will launch in May, a little behind schedule.

(Falkenstein): "The biggest challenge was the six work force roles don't exist. So we actually had to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities for these six work force roles, send out pilot surveys to stakeholders in the industry, and that took significantly longer to develop and to validate than we thought."

Falkenstein says the program is now on track to launch live exams in August. Industry leaders welcome efforts to increase the health IT talent pool, but say it won't address current staffing needs. George Hickman is executive vice president and chief information officer of Albany Medical Center. He says staff shortages are an immediate concern.

(Hickman): "I've been involved in three conversations regarding what it is we need to do better and differently to recruit and retain staff, three conversations today."

In a survey conducted last fall of 182 CIOs by the College of Healthcare Information Management Executives, 70% said their organizations had inadequate staff to implement clinical software. More than half felt the staff shortages could hinder their organization's ability to implement EHR systems and satisfy meaningful use requirements in time to qualify for incentive payments. Hickman says he also wonders if graduates of the federally funded programs will be able to hit the ground running without having direct work experience.

(Hickman): "There's going to be some amount of work helping them come in, understand our specific needs, where we're at in the project lifecycle, what the vendor packages that we're working with specifically require because they're all different. And the person's also going to need to be attuned to the culture that they're walking into."

Oregon Health and Science University professor William Hersh agrees the timing of health IT work force development dollars isn't perfect. It would have been better to put training programs in place before the requirements for meaningful use. Hersh says the upside is colleges and universities will have an increased capacity to train workers in health IT.

(Hersh): "Like any kind of big government program, parts of it will be successful, there might be parts that don't quite work out as you anticipated. But in the end, there will be a lot more people trained in being health IT professionals and there likely will be opportunities for them."

This has been a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of 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 Mina Kim, thanks for listening.