

Special Audio Transcript

Headline: President Obama's Re-Election Means Continued Federal Support for Health IT Efforts, Experts Say

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President Obama's re-election signals ongoing federal support for the adoption of electronic health records. But some providers say federal goals for meaningful use are too ambitious. This is a special report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Deirdre Kennedy.

Many health care providers put off plans to invest in new health care technologies this year.

(Johnson): "They were quite candid with us and said, 'Look, we just need to know what happens in November.'"

Erik Johnson is a senior vice president with the Avalere Health in Washington, D.C. He says many of his clients were concerned that the EHR incentive program might end if President Obama were to lose the election.

(Johnson): "The president's re-election takes a little bit of the anxiety away from health systems or physician practices either that were contemplating this type of investment or had already made it with the expectation that they were going to be able to earn meaningful use dollars."

Before the election, several congressional Republicans called for a halt to meaningful use payments. Johnson says while Republicans generally support the goals of meaningful use, they might put the incentive funds on the chopping block in upcoming budget talks.

Winning a second term has put Obama and the Democratic party in a much stronger negotiating position. Johnson says Democrats aren't likely to sacrifice an entitlement program that supports both EHR adoption and health care reform.

(Johnson): "It is relatively foundational to a lot of the payment and delivery reform provisions that were passed as part of the Affordable Care Act. There's going to be a real incentive for the administration and the Democrats in Congress to protect the investments being"

made in order to make health reform successful, and I would argue that includes health IT."

But the American Hospital Association says federal incentives may not be enough to compensate for the rising cost of investing in health IT.

AHA Director of Policy Chantal Worzala says a major challenge to successful EHR adoption is that many providers and hospitals can't get the technology support they need to meet the complex requirements for meaningful use.

(Worzala): "We're looking at a health IT marketplace that is really under the gun. We have a significant work force shortage in the health IT space, and while there are activities under way to train more workers, the pace of implementation rapidly absorbs any new entrants."

Worzala says most critical access hospitals aren't even at meaningful use Stage 1, much less ready for Stage 2. Those that are -- are waiting to hear when certified EHR products will be available so they can install them in time for the 2014 deadline.

(Worzala): "The first hospitals that need to be up and running on Stage 2 really have to have these systems in place and vetted, tested and live by Oct. 1 of next year. So that's less than a year from now. So the time frames continue to be incredibly tight and the market pressures are pretty significant."

Tom Leary -- senior director of Federal Affairs at the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society -- says Obama's re-election ensures that the federal government will focus on getting more hospitals and providers on the road to meaningful use.

(Leary): "I really think that in the next 12 months we're going to see a strong emphasis by both the administration and by the congress on making sure that meaningful use and the whole effort around health IT gets to that all important effort of interoperability and the exchange of health information."

Leary says the task ahead for the Obama administration will be finding ways to close the digital divide by identifying critical access hospitals and individual providers who haven't yet taken the first steps toward meaningful use.

(Leary): "I think the Obama administration and the agencies themselves they're targeting what communities, particularly the providers that provide care to the underserved communities, need to have, what types of resources they need in order to become meaningful users."

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 Deirdre Kennedy. Thanks for listening.