



## Arizona Health-e Connection Increases Efficiency, Quality

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Two tenets are driving the U.S. health care discussion: efficiency and quality of care.

“We have the potential to create efficiencies within health care,” said Chris Cummiskey, Arizona’s chief information officer. “We know the growth of health care spending has outpaced inflation year after year. Can we make the system more efficient? Can we use technology to improve the quality of care for citizens who are seeking health care assistance?”

Arizona is answering those questions with its **Health-e Connection**, one of eight winners of CSG Innovations Awards.

“The goal is to provide better information to the consumers in a way that can assist them in managing their contacts with hospitals, physicians’ offices, labs and other points in the health profession,” said Cummiskey, “and have one place to keep this information organized in a fashion helpful to a physician.”

Cummiskey said the state also wanted to drive as much efficiency in the health care system as possible so the overall growth in inflation could be controlled. The challenge, it seemed, was to become more efficient in the way services were provided using technology, he said.

To that end, Gov. Janet Napolitano in 2005 convened a steering committee of public and private health care stakeholders to determine a strategy to develop a state-wide electronic health data exchange. The committee spent about nine months developing a roadmap for a health information infrastructure across Arizona.

A primary ingredient of the roadmap was the development of a nonprofit board of directors to advance health information technology and health information exchange throughout the state. Arizona has received guidance from e-health initiatives in Washington, D.C.

“Fortunately for our situation, Arizona is out in front of the curve in terms of developing this e-health approach,” Cummiskey said.

He said a successful e-health program requires buy-in from many different stakeholders, including the many smaller physician offices in Arizona with five physicians or less.

“How do you incentivize technology at the physician level?” he said. “You’ve got a real challenge in how do we get doctors’ offices who are dealing with mountains of paper to work with emergent technology.”

In addition, Cummiskey said the health information infrastructure accessible to hospitals, physicians, labs and clinics needs to be planned. “If you’re serious about moving that information, you’ve got to have the infrastructure to do it,” he said.

The state is encouraging regional health information organizations at the local level, such as one established in southern Arizona, based in Tucson. These regional organizations, Cummiskey said, will be responsible for developing health information technology at the physician level, and an exchange process that connects communities and medical data.

Cummiskey said the program plans to develop a system in which individuals own, and have access to, their medical information. The data would be a compendium of their medical histories and medications used becoming “a summary of their health experience throughout their lives that can be controlled by the individual patient,” he said.

The goal is to establish the infrastructure and have electronic medical records for every Arizonian by 2010. The state recently received a Medicaid transformation grant, which will provide \$12 million to establish electronic medical records for the Medicaid population in Arizona. Cummiskey said the finance model for other Arizona patients is still unclear at this point.

The state faces many challenges in moving the information. Arizona Health-e Connection must sort out how the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements and state and local rules and policies affect the exchange of health information, Cummiskey said.

He said the state received a grant from the National Governors Association to develop a template to work through privacy issues and ensure the information is secure. Cummiskey said the state hopes to have those templates available in December, not only for Arizona’s program but for use by other states as well.

Management of the program has transitioned to the nonprofit organization, and Arizona’s Health-e Connection recently selected Brad Tritle as the organization’s first executive director.

“We are working at the nonprofit to make sure we are aligning our strategies, that over the next 12 months we have good standards in place (and) have good guidance as to what we can expect from the state perspective,” Cummiskey said.

### Fast Facts

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates the use of health information technology could save the U.S. \$140 billion per year in health care costs.
- Arizona Health-e Connection could result in \$2.6 billion in annual savings in state health care costs.