

Advocating for HIM: Election Year Brings Opportunities to Make Candidates Aware of HIM Issues

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by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA

At times, Americans may feel that our government and laws, at a local or national level, are not within our personal control. But this year's elections give voters a chance to make a difference and get involved in shaping the nation's future. For HIM professionals, it's a good time to make candidates aware of important issues like electronic health records, data exchange, and the work force.

Getting Involved in Your Future

In November voters will be electing a president and representatives to the US House of Representatives. Some might also have the chance to decide who should represent their state in the US Senate, and many will also be casting ballots to elect local and state officials.

In the 2000 presidential election, we saw the power of a vote. This year, there are several close votes predicted, not only for the office of president, but also for senators, congressmen, governors, and state legislators. Candidates seeking offices must work to gain your vote by answering to you, the voters.

Each candidate will, of course, be issuing statements and running ads speaking to the issues of the day, but candidates in a close election have to also consider other issues. This is your chance to advocate for your issues—personal and professional. Schools, crime, wars overseas, and terrorism are issues we hear about every day. But what about issues that relate to your employment? Your profession?

This is a good time to talk to, or better still to write or e-mail, your candidate about these issues. After all, for the next two, four, or six years these people will be involved in making decisions that will affect your profession and your employment for years to come. This is a good time to let them know what you need and believe and find out what they are willing to support.

Employment issues vary for health information managers. Some HIM professionals are affected according to the organizations they work for. Reimbursement, regulations, budget allocations, and laws affect the healthcare environment and how healthcare organizations operate in the future. But there are also a number of issues that warrant your consideration and advocacy as well. These are not easy issues to discuss, but there are ways to raise awareness. Here are a few suggestions.

Electronic Health Records

The president raised the issue of electronic health records (EHRs) in his 2004 state of the union address, and money has been allocated in the 2005 budget for this purpose. It is past time to let your candidate know that this is a key issue for the future of healthcare and the health and safety of his or her constituents.

Your profession is deeply involved in working to identify national standards for the EHR, and Congress must support this effort through grants for projects to further its definition. Congress must also ensure consensus on the EHR definition and standards through federal leadership and ensure their adoption quickly before non-standard systems are adopted that will prevent our country from easily exchanging data necessary to support our healthcare system.

National and Regional Data Exchange

Members of Congress must be ready to join in the discussions related to establishing a national health information infrastructure (NHII) and supporting local infrastructures that are being considered or are under way. Already some Senate

and House committees and subcommittees are considering needed regulations related to EHR standards, confidentiality, security, and interstate use (pre-emption) for an NHII environment. Similarly, discussions continue on financing capital to allow organizations to incorporate EHRs into their system and be part of the NHII or a local infrastructure.

Just as important as the IT requirements are those for information and data. Most legislators are not conversant with health information and data, but they do understand that data and standards assist in the prevention of medical errors, public health surveillance, and improved healthcare quality. And you can certainly explain the need to update our 30-year-old classification systems and why we need to upgrade to ICD-10.

In some cases you may not be able to go into detail. Sometimes it is better to indicate that HIM issues are going to be on candidates' plates if they are elected, and you would look forward to assisting them or their staff when the issue does arise. Remind them that their vote could affect organizations and individuals in their district. If you want to be consulted in the future, it's a good idea to get on the calling list now.

While this column usually addresses national issues, many issues also relate to state elections. This year a number of states have begun to talk about laws related to electronic records. We need to ensure that state officials recognize the need to have records, information, or data requirements that allow for the appropriate flow of information between states. Many HIM professionals live and work in "border" areas that certainly do not want prohibitions on the transfer of necessary data or different standards in different states.

Bioterrorism, public health data, privacy laws, outsourcing—all of these topics have been discussed locally and nationally. All relate to healthcare data and data systems. All are in your purview to discuss. How is your state networking to supply health data for public health? Do your state privacy laws coordinate with HIPAA? It's time to raise the issues and learn whether your candidate will listen to you when the time comes. Now is the time to advocate and let candidates know of the expertise you and your state or national association can contribute.

Building an HIM Work Force

One additional item up for discussion this year should be the HIM work force. AHIMA's work force study, as well as studies by the US Department of Labor, point out the need to educate and advance the HIM profession. To do this, we need to recruit new students and invest in our HIM education programs, schools, and faculty. This takes financial investment on the part of states and the US government.

Work-force legislation titled the Allied Health Reinvestment Act (HR 4016) has been introduced in the US House of Representatives. This legislation is designed to provide allied health, including HIM, with funding to sustain and build education programs. We need you to get your members of Congress to support this legislation now and to urge new members of Congress and state legislatures to support such legislation and funding in the future.

Contact your member of Congress today (use the online AHIMA Advocacy Assistant at www.ahima.org/dc/aa) and urge his or her support of work force legislation. We'll let you know via AHIMA's e-Alert when a similar bill is entered into the Senate.

Need more information? Just drop us a line. Let's ensure our HIM concerns are addressed in 2005.

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