

Climbing the Hill: Hill Day 2014 Brings AHIMA Members Opportunity to Advocate for HIM

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By AHIMA's Advocacy and Policy Team

Spring is an exciting time in Washington, DC. The cherry blossoms reach full bloom, tourists arrive to visit the nation's historical sites, and HIM professionals gear up for a full year of public policy activities at AHIMA's annual Leadership Symposium and Hill Day events. This year, however, spring also marked an unexpected curve ball for HIM and healthcare professionals across the country, underscoring just how important advocacy efforts and awareness are.

On April 1, 2014 President Barack Obama signed into law H.R. 4302, the Protecting Access to Medicare Act of 2014, also known as the "SGR Patch." In addition to creating a temporary patch for the Medicare sustainable growth rate (SGR), the bill included language that delayed government implementation of ICD-10-CM/PCS until at least October 1, 2015.

Bringing HIM's Message to the Hill

Our 71,000 members, as well as many other stakeholders such as healthcare providers and health IT vendors, have been working diligently to meet the October 1, 2014 ICD-10 deadline. When news of the legislation broke, AHIMA staff and members alike rose to the occasion, advocating for the 2014 implementation date to continue.

Thousands of AHIMA members and ICD-10 proponents contacted their congressional representatives and senators over the days leading up to the final vote, asking them to vote against the bill and not delay ICD-10. On social media, 5,500 tweets were sent with the hashtag #NoDelay. Over 10,000 calls were made to Congress, and over 1,000 e-mails were sent to legislators.

AHIMA maintains its commitment to being a resource for all stakeholders during the transition and will continue working with public sector organizations and agencies, such as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, along with industry partners. It's more important than ever for HIM professionals to advocate for the benefits of ICD-10 implementation.

Knocking on Congress's Door

Nearly 200 HIM professionals representing 45 component state associations (CSA) participated in AHIMA's 2014 Leadership and Advocacy Symposium and Hill Day events to formally kick off AHIMA's 2014 grassroots public policy initiatives.

The event, held March 17-18, began with an opportunity for HIM state leaders to hone their state leadership and advocacy skills at the symposium. This is the second year that AHIMA has hosted the symposium in our nation's capital. Having the event in Washington, DC provided an opportunity to highlight the importance of engaging directly with federally elected officials and federal employees on issues that are important to the HIM profession. During the symposium, HIM professionals discussed current healthcare legislative initiatives with congressional aides from both Republican and Democratic offices. They discussed ICD-10-CM/PCS implementation, patient matching strategies, and reforming the Recovery Audit Contractor (RAC) program, in addition to other relevant legislative issues.

A key take-away from the discussion included the importance of following up on Hill Day meetings with letters and phone calls to congressional representatives. Legislative aides encouraged participants to stay engaged in the ongoing healthcare discussions throughout the year—not just while in Washington, DC.

Symposium participants also interacted with communication directors from Capitol Hill. The directors discussed their diverse experiences working in Congress, which included working for key committees in Congress that have oversight of healthcare legislation. They agreed that social media outlets are becoming an increasingly important part of understanding constituents'

views and opinions—specifically, the use of online branding and hashtags. Throughout the event participants were able to use the Social Media Station to put what they learned into practice. Participants used the hashtags #HIM, #HillDay14, #AHIMA, and #AHIMAStudent and posted photos of the speakers and their legislative meetings.

ICD-10 Advocacy Always a Top Priority

In the spirit of collaboration, AHIMA invited guests from several other healthcare organizations to participate in a policy panel. Representatives from the American Medical Association, the College of Health Information Management Executives, Surescripts, and the Medical Group Management Association shared their organizations' public policy priorities in the 113th Congress. The panelists discussed current issues surrounding the “meaningful use” EHR Incentive Program, interoperability, RAC audits, and implementation of ICD-10-CM/PCS. As recent events have shown, there remains a very real possibility of further legislative delay of ICD-10 implementation.

Members on the panel acknowledged that there are legislators in both chambers of Congress who would like to pass legislation to completely stop ICD-10 implementation through bills such as H.R. 1701, the Cutting Costly Codes Act, and its companion bill S.1012 in the Senate. As a result of past opposition efforts, Hill Day participants made ICD-10 a top priority to discuss with their legislative offices while in Washington, DC. In addition, participants committed to following up with congressional representatives to ensure that their legislators would oppose any efforts to stop implementation. With the most recent setback to ICD-10 implementation, these efforts only increase exponentially in importance.

The first day of the event rounded out with a presentation on the Blue Button Initiative from Simone Myrie, a public health analyst with the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC). The initiative encourages patients to view their information online and download their personal health records. Myrie discussed the importance of partnering with organizations like AHIMA on this initiative and encouraged AHIMA's membership to take the pledge for themselves and their CSA. By the end of the day 10 CSAs committed to taking the pledge and many more members took the individual pledge and proudly wore their Blue Button pins.

National Need for Quality Data Emphasized

The second day started with a legislative breakfast on Capitol Hill. The morning of Hill Day is always filled with a lot of excitement; participants share the mutual goal of raising awareness about the HIM profession and educating congressional staff on healthcare legislative initiatives benefitting quality health data. During the breakfast, participants interacted with other CSA leaders and congressional health legislative assistants.

This year's keynote speaker was Deven McGraw, JD, MPH, LLM, director of the Health Privacy Project at the Center for Democracy and Technology. McGraw is a leader in the effort to advance the adoption and implementation of health information technology and electronic health information exchange to improve healthcare. She was also one of three people appointed by Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services, to serve on the Health Information Technology Policy Committee (HITPC). McGraw chairs HITPC's Privacy and Security Tiger Team Workgroup and serves on its Meaningful Use, Information Exchange, and Strategic Plan Workgroups. McGraw provided an update about the HITPC, focusing attention on efforts related to privacy and security of health information. She reminded AHIMA members of their crucial role in ensuring the quality and integrity of health information and encouraged participants to stay involved.

The legislative breakfast was a great way for members to convene together before starting a full day of meetings. Combined, participants attended hundreds of meetings with health policy staff. During their meetings with congressional offices they discussed topics such as reforming the RAC program, the developing importance and role of information governance, and ICD-10.

Just the Beginning

As AHIMA members are well aware, continuing to rely on the outdated and imprecise ICD-9-CM platform adversely affects the value of healthcare data. ICD-9 presents a potential risk to public health as it does not meet current needs to track,

identify, and analyze new clinical services and treatments available for patients. The transition to ICD-10 will help reap the benefits of electronic health records, maximize health information exchange, and play an important role in the realization of these shared goals.

Hill Day marks the kickoff of a year-long collaborative process to educate legislators and industry professionals on behalf of the profession and highlight the need for quality health data. AHIMA members serve as the go-to HIM experts and resources for their elected officials in Congress. Members will continue outreach and education in their home states throughout the year—legislation can move quickly and unexpectedly. AHIMA members are truly innovative forces in both healthcare and public policy.

For information on how to become an HIM advocate, visit AHIMA's Advocacy Assistant at <http://www.ahima.org/about/advocacy>.

The AHIMA Advocacy and Policy Team (advocacyandpolicy@ahima.org) is based in Washington, DC.

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