

New Coordinator Shapes Direction of ONC

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By AHIMA's Advocacy and Policy Team

Karen DeSalvo, MD, MPH, MSc, believes it's time to shake things up a little at the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC). DeSalvo, who previously served as the New Orleans city health commissioner and senior health policy advisor to Mayor Mitch Landrieu, began her appointment as National Coordinator for Health IT in January 2014.

DeSalvo assumed the helm while the agency was taking on a challenging balancing act, facing the regulatory burdens of multiple competing priorities such as HIPAA, the Affordable Care Act, stage 2 of the "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program, and ICD-10-CM/PCS.

Shake-Up Announced on First Day

Just one day after taking office, DeSalvo wasted no time sharing her initial thoughts on the direction of ONC's work. At a Health IT Policy Committee (HITPC) meeting she outlined a plan that would focus ONC's efforts on harnessing health IT for multiple purposes, including public health. She indicated that she would like to see improvements over time that would allow for assistance in preparing for disasters.

DeSalvo further outlined her plan in April at a HITPC meeting when she talked about expanding ONC's priorities beyond meaningful use. "This seems like a good time to make some form and function adjustments to the policy committee and the workgroups," DeSalvo said. "We are pivoting to readjust to our smaller budgets and perhaps, over time, changes to the structure of our agency."

Stating that the HITPC workgroups are going through an evolution, DeSalvo presented a proposed restructuring designed to support current ONC priorities, stressing the importance of communication and reducing redundancy. DeSalvo proposed four workgroups that HITPC would focus on:

- Health IT strategic planning
- Advanced health models and meaningful use
- Health IT implementation, usability, and safety
- Interoperability and health information exchange

Privacy and security and consumer engagement would cut across all of these topics, she noted.

Stating the opportunity to be as strategic and forward thinking as possible, DeSalvo stressed that the workgroups will be flexible and easily adjusted. Transition began in early May, with efforts continuing through the summer.

Organizational Changes Reshuffle Staff

In June 2014 DeSalvo continued to shake things up by announcing multiple organizational changes. In an internal memo to staff DeSalvo stated that as the agency's original health IT infrastructure and program funding from the HITECH Act was expiring, ONC would reshuffle staff into a smaller number of departments. She stressed overall accountability to the US population as a primary concern of the agency, stating that "it is our responsibility to take this opportunity to reshape our agency to be as efficient and effective as possible."

The main focus of ONC going forward will be to foster health IT interoperability, support care transformation, and develop a framework to support the use of health data by providers, insurers, researchers, and others. DeSalvo went on to state in the internal communication that "this new structure will help us expand our role as convener to further advance new and innovative uses of health IT across the federal government and with the private sector."

As a part of the staffing restructure new consolidated departments were announced:

- National Coordinator (Karen DeSalvo, MD, MPH, MSc)
- Deputy National Coordinator (Jacob Reider, MD)
- Office of Care Transformation (Kelly Cronin)
- Office of the Chief Privacy Officer (Kathryn Marchesini, JD—acting)
- Office of the Chief Operating Officer (Lisa Lewis)
- Office of the Chief Scientist (Doug Fridsma, MD, PhD)
- Office of Clinical Quality and Safety (Judy Murphy, RN)
- Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Analysis (Seth Pazinski)
- Office of Policy (Jodi Daniel)
- Office of Programs (Kim Lynch)
- Office of Public Affairs and Communications (Peter Ashkenaz—acting)
- Office of Standards and Technology (Steve Posnack)

All departments now report to DeSalvo or Reider. DeSalvo aims to improve the overall efficiency of ONC by combining similar functions and thus improving the group's ability to elevate critical priority functions. The new structure provides a much flatter organization chart and a more accountable reporting mechanism.

Agency leaders have already begun a focus on the development and implementation of an interoperability roadmap, furthering care transformation, establishing a framework to support the use of health data, improving patient safety, improving public health, and further advancing medical science.

Workgroups Whittled Down

DeSalvo's work continued, and on July 8, 2014, it was announced that the current 15 Health IT Policy Committee workgroups and subcommittees would be reduced to six. To further emphasize the need for change, DeSalvo, who serves as the HITPC chair along with vice chair Paul Tang, announced the six new HITPC workgroups and chairs.

These workgroups include:

- HIT Strategy and Innovation
 - Chair: David Lansky, president and CEO of the Pacific Business Group on Health
 - Co-chair: TBD
- Advanced Health Models and Meaningful Use
 - Chair: Paul Tang, MD, chief innovation and technology officer at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation
 - Co-chair: Joe Kimura, MD, medical director of analytics and reporting systems at Atrius Health, based in Boston, MA
- HIT Implementation, Usability and Safety
 - Chair: David Bates, MD, medical director of clinical and quality analysis, information systems at Partners HealthCare, based in Boston, MA
 - Co-chair: Larry Wolf, health information technology strategist with Kindred Healthcare, based in Louisville, KY
- Interoperability and Health Information Exchange
 - Chair: Micky Tripathi, president and CEO of the Massachusetts eHealth Collaborative
 - Co-chair: Chris Lehmann, MD, professor of pediatrics and biomedical informatics at Vanderbilt University, based in Nashville, TN
- Privacy and Security
 - Chair: Deven McGraw, partner with Manatt, Phelps & Phillips

- Co-chair: TBD
- Consumer Perspective and Engagement
 - Chair: Christine Bechtel, president of the Bechtel Health Advisory Group, based in Washington, DC
 - Co-chair: TBD

More Changes Likely to Come

In six short months, DeSalvo successfully realigned ONC with the next steps needed to advance health IT in the US. Her goals of promoting interoperable healthcare, improving efficiencies at the agency, and providing more accountability will definitely be something to watch.

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

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