

Seeing the Big Picture: Site Provides Access to Healthcare Data Collected by the Federal Government

Save to myBoK

By Allison Viola, MBA, RHIA

In February 2011 the federal government launched health.data.gov, a Web site that allows healthcare professionals and the public to access healthcare data collected by the federal government through its multiple quality reporting programs and initiatives. The site is a community within the data.gov Web site, which was launched in 2009 in an effort to make government more open and transparent.

The information available on health.data.gov offers HIM professionals and the public a window into the current healthcare climate.

Health.data.gov's Origins

At the beginning of his administration, President Obama issued a memorandum to all executive departments and agencies directing the chief technology officer, director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the administrator of the General Services Administration to develop an Open Government Directive. The initiative was based on the following concepts:

- Government should be transparent.
- Government should be participatory.
- Government should be collaborative.¹

In response to the memo and through the direction of the chief technology officer, Office of Management and Budget, and General Services Administration, the Federal CIO Council was formed as an interagency federal initiative.

Hosted by the General Services Administration, the council was charged with developing a flagship initiative called data.gov. The initiative was "intended to allow the public to easily find, access, understand, and use data that are generated by the Federal government."²

Data Catalogs Available

Launched in May 2009, data.gov provides three types of searchable catalogs of data sets:

1. Raw data. This catalog allows users to instantly view and download platform-independent, machine-readable data (e.g., XML, CSV, KMZ/KML, or shape file formats). It also offers a link to a metadata page specific to the respective data set. The metadata page has additional links to authoritative source information from the sponsoring agency's Web site, including any pertinent agency technical documentation regarding the data set.
2. Tool catalog. This catalog offers simple, application-driven access to federal data with hyperlinks. It features widgets, data-mining and extraction tools, applications, and other services.
3. Geodata catalog. This catalog contains federal geospatial data. It includes links to download the data sets and a metadata page with details on the data sets, as well as links to more detailed Federal Geographic Data Committee metadata information.

Core Users

Core Users of data.gov fall into six general categories, employing the data sets for a variety of purposes.

Core Users	Uses	Avenues for Interaction
General public	The general public can use the platform to download data sets as well as discover and access federal data via third-party visualizations, applications, tools, or data infrastructure.	Web site, tools (agency-provided and third party)
Application developers	Application developers can develop and deliver applications by leveraging the raw data, APIs, or other methods of data delivery.	APIs, third-party data infrastructure
Government mission owners	Mission owners can expand access to and leverage data from their public sector partners to enhance service delivery, drive performance outcomes, and effectively manage government resources.	Web site, tools (agency-endorsed)
Data infrastructure developers	Data infrastructure developers can increase the utility of Data.gov by enhancing its search capability, metadata catalog processes, data interoperability, and ongoing evolution.	APIs
Research community	The research community can help unlock the value of multiple datasets by providing insight on a plethora of research topics.	Web site, APIs
Data infrastructure innovators	Existing entities and new ventures developing innovative data and application offerings can combine public sector data with their own data.	Web site, APIs, bulk downloads
Source: Office of E-Government and IT, Office of Management and Budget. "Data.gov Concept of Operations." Version 1.0. 2009. www.data.gov/documents/data_gov_conops_v1.0.pdf .		

Health.data.gov

An active participant and supporter of the data.gov initiative, the health data community pooled the data sets, tools, and applications used by a variety of agencies, including the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and launched health.data.gov.

Health.data.gov is segmented by specific categories to help healthcare professionals and the public search for information about a particular population or program. Some of the categories include health workforce, healthcare resources, financial and cost, medical research and science, and healthcare resources.

The data sets are available for extraction to enable further review and analysis in the form of an Excel spreadsheet, an application programming interface, and other methods. This functionality allows users to download data from the Web site for machine processing.

In an effort to support a more open and transparent government, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has begun publishing clinical quality-linked data on health.data.gov beginning with the information from Hospital Compare, a Web site developed for consumers and patients that provides information on how well hospitals provide recommended care.

Clinical quality-linked data consist of structured data that allow for improved machine processing, classification of data, and results of consumer surveys detailing how a hospital compares to other facilities within a state or the nation.

For instance, under the healthcare resources category, one data set, the clinical decision support inventory, contains a description of past and present clinical decision support projects across the federal government. The data set covers a wide variety of clinical conditions, patient populations, environments, and technical capabilities.

The information provided by the clinical decision support data set presents a summary detailing the agency, time frames of when the data were updated and released, frequency, and a brief description of the data set. Users who use the data from the data set can also rate the data set, thus encouraging user participation and feedback.

In addition, the data set information provides keywords or tags that assist in the search function with a supporting unique identification number.

Agency information is provided through uniform resource locators that link the user to the agency where the information originates and supporting documentation to support the use of the data sets.

The metadata associated with each data set use an adaptation of the Dublin Core metadata standard, which applies additional qualifiers to further define the meaning of resources. This enables the user to increase the specificity of the metadata. Metadata may provide such information as a description of the data set, administration, technical functionality, and or legal requirements.

Notes

1. Obama, Barack. "Transparency and Open Government." Press release. www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment.
2. Office of E-Government and IT, Office of Management and Budget. "Data.gov Concept of Operations." Version 1.0. 2009. www.data.gov/documents/data_gov_conops_v1.0.pdf.

Allison Viola (allison.viola@ahima.org) is director of federal relations at AHIMA.

Article citation:

Viola, Allison F.. "Seeing the Big Picture: Site Provides Access to Healthcare Data Collected by the Federal Government" *Journal of AHIMA* 83, no.2 (February 2012): 46-47.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.