

## Making the Connection with HIT

KELLY DUNKIN

*Vice President of Philanthropy, Colorado Health Foundation*

Health information technology (HIT) is now widely regarded as a promising tool for improving the quality, safety, and efficiency of the health care delivery system – largely due to a major influx of federal funding and the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Despite its newfound prominence, the benefits of HIT were only championed by a small cadre of health care professionals a mere six years ago.

As the vice president of philanthropy for The Colorado Health Foundation – one of only a handful of early “champions” of HIT – I have personally seen how this emerging technology can positively influence the way health organizations function.

For the uninitiated, HIT uses computer hardware and software to store, protect, retrieve, and transfer clinical, administrative, and financial information electronically within health care settings. Studies by the RAND Corporation and the Center for Information Technology Leadership estimate the net savings for implementing HIT nationwide at \$80 billion a year. Another study shows that 95 percent of avoidable tests could be eliminated through the deployment of fully interoperable HIT systems in the United States.

While automated processes and connectivity have been commonplace in other sectors, many in the health care field continue to labor under the weight of printed medical records and paper charts when it comes to managing and sharing information. Until recently most HIT focused on administrative and financial transactions, rather than on improving the quality of care delivered.

Despite proven benefits, attempts to push HIT into the 21<sup>st</sup> century were met with little support. For example, in 2005 President George W. Bush proposed dedicating \$100 million to finance HIT – only \$50 million was ultimately approved (a mere fraction of the \$17 billion later allotted to HIT as part of the federal stimulus act). While few others ventured into the field, the California HealthCare Foundation laid much of the groundwork for other foundations by investing significant dollars in HIT.

### SEIZING THE INITIATIVE

Inspired by the California HealthCare Foundation’s efforts and the visionary work of organizations such as the Quality

Health Network (a nationally recognized regional health information network conceived by physicians and based in Colorado’s Western Slope), the Colorado Health Foundation began to explore ways to promote and mobilize HIT throughout the state.

In 2007 the foundation launched Healthy Connections, a multiyear, multimillion-dollar initiative designed to use HIT to increase the number of Coloradans who receive quality, integrated care. Healthy Connections, the largest single investment the foundation had made up to that time, represented a significant departure from the organization’s prior work.

The foundation works to make Colorado the healthiest state in the nation by increasing the number of Coloradans with health insurance; ensuring they have access to quality, coordinated care; and encouraging healthy living. Prior to Healthy Connections, the majority of our funding was used for “direct services.” Some within the organization questioned how an investment in HIT would advance our vision. After much input (and scrutiny), the initiative was approved because the foundation board of directors agreed it aligned effectively with our newly adopted goals of improving quality and coordination while reducing costs in health care.

### NEXT STEPS

Through Healthy Connections, the foundation focused funding efforts on safety net organizations with an emphasis on patient-centered primary care. Phase One of Healthy Connections centered on health care providers who already had HIT systems in place and wanted to leverage their technology further. We invested \$2.5 million to encourage and support innovative efforts from “early adopters” in HIT.

Phase Two reached out to rural health care providers who could not obtain the equipment or the expertise to implement electronic health records (EHRs) without support. (An EHR is an electronic record of health-related information that conforms to nationally recognized coordination standards, which can be developed and managed by authorized clinicians across more than one health care organization.) In total, the foundation invested \$9.4 million to build and support HIT – issuing 75 grants to 43 organizations in Colorado.

Healthy Connections provided funding for a wide range of

HIT-related projects. The foundation not only provided money for hardware and software, but also for support and professional expertise to help grantees develop an HIT plan that enabled them to use the technology to maximum success.

Under the four-year initiative, we supported organizations at different stages of readiness for HIT. Some of our grantees had implemented systems that completely eliminated paper charts and were looking to build their capacity. Some required “practice management” software to capture patient demographics, schedule appointments, and generate reports. Others were starting from scratch.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As Healthy Connections evolved, the foundation streamlined its support of clinics adopting HIT, meeting our grant partners where they were on the HIT continuum and providing support tailored to their needs. For example:

- An alliance of safety net health providers, the North Colorado Health Alliance, already had embarked on a \$1.8 million project to improve its HIT systems. The organization used its Healthy Connections grant to bring three new organizations into the fold and added comprehensive behavioral health to the mix.
- Another grantee, Mountain Family Health Centers, developed a “data warehouse” to store data extracted from actual patient EHRs that would allow them to keep track of chronic disease population trends and monitor health outcomes.
- Yet another grantee, High Plains Community Health Center, received funding to support the salary of an HIT resource manager to manage clinical outcome reports, support implementation of the center’s quality improvement plan, provide training for new and existing staff, and support optimization of HIT systems.

Though we knew HIT was emerging as a powerful and necessary tool in the future of health care, we had not anticipated that the federal government would make a significant investment. Through the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (or HITECH) Act, the government earmarked \$17 billion for providers that apply “meaningful use” of EHR systems to improve health care quality and delivery. Simply put, meaningful use means providers need to show that they are using certified EHR technology in ways that can be measured in terms of quality and quantity. HITECH positioned many foundation grantees to take advantage of federal incentive payments. As additional testimony to its importance in delivering quality care, incentives for HIT adoption were included in the ACA.

## MEASURING RESULTS

Thanks to the pioneering work of our grantees and other partners through Healthy Connections and other statewide

efforts, Colorado’s safety net clinics have made significant gains in adopting HIT throughout the state. In fact, the Colorado Community Health Network reports that 12 of 15 federally qualified health centers in the state have fully implemented a certified EHR system, while the remaining three are in the process of implementing systems.

According to evaluation results conducted by Full Circle Projects, Inc. (an independent consulting firm) in late 2010 and early 2011, 100 percent of the Healthy Connections grantees surveyed had implemented an EHR system or planned to do so. The firm also estimated that 439,321 Coloradans now benefit from EHR systems in large measure due to the Healthy Connections initiative.

Robyn Leone, director of the Colorado Regional Extension Center, credits the foundation for deploying HIT in more safety net clinics throughout Colorado and for positioning many of those centers ahead of the curve nationally. Along with accelerating the adoption of HIT in Colorado, Healthy Connections established the use of HIT as the “standard” among many of the organizations we fund.

Read more about Healthy Connections’ success stories in *Healthy Connections in Colorado: A Primer for HIT Success*, a report published by the foundation late last year.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As patients and health professionals realize the promise of improved outcomes and greater efficiencies through HIT, there is still much work to be done. Despite great strides in recent years, health care is still well behind the information technology curve in Colorado and throughout the nation. As evidenced by the Health Connections experience, however, there is increasing promise and evidence that HIT adoption and refinement is accelerating.

Though Healthy Connections concluded in mid-2011, the initiative continues to make a difference in Colorado as the state’s health care providers increasingly share health data across different organizations through health information exchange. The Colorado Regional Health Information Exchange, another foundation grantee, is collaborating with partners throughout Colorado with the goal of facilitating the adoption of HIT in every community in the state by 2015.

Working with our partner organizations, the foundation is committed to supporting HIT as an essential technology that helps our grantees meet their missions of providing high-quality health care. Investment in HIT is one that will reap benefits for individuals throughout Colorado and nationwide.

*VIEWS FROM THE FIELD* is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or [fmitchell@gih.org](mailto:fmitchell@gih.org).