HealthAssistance PARTNERSHIP

TECHNOLOGY SURVEY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT OVERVIEW

With the changes in the Medicare program and the rising number of beneficiaries, as well as the growing involvement of beneficiary caregivers in healthcare decision making, the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) network is an increasingly critical aid to navigating the bewildering maze of health insurance issues. The SHIP network is a valued resource within the aging community, but it is also widely viewed as under-funded and facing several impediments to fulfilling its true potential.

To begin addressing these issues, the Health Assistance Partnership (HAP) received a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) to study best practices in capacity-development for the SHIP network. Atlantic funded HAP to pursue a pilot project in six states[1] to develop and test models for cost-effectively enhancing and expanding SHIP operations in three key areas: outreach, volunteer management and technology. As part of this pilot study, HAP is to design a national roll-out strategy to disseminate the lessons learned among the six states to the national SHIP network.

ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS

One surprising discovery of the assessment was that 92% of the sites[2] operate modern computer equipment[3]. Further good news was that 94% of the sites have some form of Internet connectivity, with the majority (72%) having high-speed access. A final bit of encouragement came in the finding that 61% of the sites use Internet-based tools in their counseling sessions.
Contrary to initial assumptions, the technology assessment showed that the network's greatest need is not infrastructure, but advice and models that convey how to effectively deploy that infrastructure to improve program performance and quality.

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[1] The six states participating in the pilot program are: Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, Ohio and Pennsylvania.
[2] Seventy-two sites participated in at least one part of the initial survey, follow-up and/or site visits. This represents 80% of the 90 sites within the pilot project.
[3] Modern equipment was defined within this study as having equipment powered by one of Microsoft's latest operating systems, such as Windows 2000 or Windows XP. These operating systems require a base equipment configuration that is sufficiently powerful for the majority of SHIP activities, hence a reasonable benchmark for classifying equipment.

While a few organizations still need to improve their basic infrastructure, it is clear that HAP's greatest technological impact on the network will come from showing the SHIPs how to use the tools they have to serve their clients and manage their processes. Showcasing the value and cost-effectiveness of technology-driven innovations can simultaneously elevate the ceiling while raising the floor of the network's overall capacity.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the assessment and initial discoveries from the mini-pilot projects suggest these high-level recommendations:

- Continue to focus on "backbone" or infrastructure technology initiatives such as the Ohio client-contact form project and the Maryland data-exchange, to fill the gaps left by CMS and prepare the SHIPs for the inevitable increase in performance-based measurements (further enhancing HAP's value to the SHIP network).
- Develop content platforms like the Mississippi KMS, Montana distance-learning tool, and Iowa recertification testing tool, to leverage investment dollars on initiatives that can be efficiently repurposed to serve a large number of SHIPs.
- Make technology recommendations available for states with little or no internal IT support; Consider developing an online IT support forum.
- Encourage HAP internal staff to continue to think creatively about ways to apply technology to solving problems in the four core domains of a successful SHIP program.

Specific tactical implementation steps are discussed in detail within the full document.