

Federal Health Update

OCT. 25, 2013

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EXECUTIVE AND CONGRESSIONAL NEWS

- **On Oct. 24, 2013, Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, CMS Director Marilyn Tavenner, Valerie Jarrett, Chris Jennings and Denis McDonough met with health insurance executives to discuss open enrollment and ongoing implementation of the Affordable Care Act.**

Specifically, officials met to address problems with the healthcare.gov, specifically the “834” forms and direct enrollment.

Attendees included:

- Mark Bertolini, CEO, Aetna
- Bruce Broussard, CEO, Humana
- Chet Burrell, CEO, CareFirst
- Patrick Geraghty, CEO, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida
- Jay Gellert, President & CEO, Health Net, Inc.
- Patricia Hemingway Hall, President & CEO, Health Care Services Corporation
- Daniel J. Hilferty, President & CEO, Independence Blue Cross
- Karen Ignagni, President & CEO, America's Health Insurance Plans
- John Molina, Chief Financial Officer, Molina Healthcare
- Michael Neidorff, Chairman & CEO, Centene Corp.

- James Roosevelt, President & CEO, Tufts Health Plan
- Scott Serota, President & CEO, Blue Cross Blue Shield Association
- Joseph Swedish, CEO, Wellpoint
- Bernard Tyson, CEO, Kaiser Permanente

Problems with the site, healthcare.gov, have been extensive. According to one survey, only one in five people who tried to log on did it without a hitting roadblock. A quarter couldn't even create an account. The Spanish-language version of the site is delayed. In addition, insurers have reported that they are receiving incomplete or corrupted applications that they cannot process, and states are having trouble accessing the federal data.

This week the government contractors responsible for designing the site testified before congress and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius will testify next week.

- **Florida Rep. C.W. Bill Young, the longest-serving Republican in the House, died Oct. 18, 2013.**

Young was 82 and had been hospitalized in recent weeks at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. He had already announced he would not seek re-election in 2014, citing his health and a desire to spend more time with his family.

Young, first elected in 1970, is best known for his longtime service on the House Appropriations Committee, where he was influential in securing millions of dollars for military contracts and special projects in his district and throughout Florida.

Young came to Washington in 1971 after serving in the Florida Senate — including a stint as the chamber's minority leader. His willingness to work across the aisle with Democrats initially cost him the chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee, which he didn't take over until 1999. Then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich had passed over Young for the chairmanship after the 1994 "Republican Revolution," even though Young had the seniority to lead the panel.

When his six years as full committee chairman were over, Young resumed the gavel of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee — which made him a key player on Pentagon spending for the last few years.

- **Former House speaker Tom Foley, a Democrat known for his ability to forge consensus but who was a casualty of the Republican revolution in 1994, died Oct. 18, 2013.**

He was 84 years old and died of complications from a stroke suffered last December. His wife, Heather, told the Associated Press that he had been in hospice care at home in the nation's capital since May.

Foley, a former U.S. ambassador to Japan in the Clinton administration, represented eastern Washington state in the U.S. House of Representatives for 15 terms, from 1965 to 1995.

As he rose through the leadership ranks — from majority whip to majority leader and finally to speaker in 1989 — he became known as a consensus builder.

He helped forge a compromise that allowed the deficit-reducing Gramm-Rudman-Hollings legislation to go through in the mid-1980s. He publicly supported President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, on his controversial economic strategy. During President Bill Clinton's administration, Mr. Foley helped him win passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement despite opposition from many other Democrats. He lost his 1994 election to George R. Nethercutt and was replaced by Newt Gingrich as Republicans took over the House.

MILITARY HEALTH CARE NEWS

- **The Army chief of staff announced the following general officer assignments:**
 - Maj. Gen. Richard W. Thomas, commanding general, Western Regional Medical Command, Tacoma, Wash., to director, health operations, Defense Health Agency, Falls Church, Va.
 - Brig. Gen. John M. Cho, deputy commanding general (Support), U.S. Army Medical Command, Falls Church, Va., to commanding general, Western Regional Medical Command, Tacoma, Wash.

VETERANS AFFAIRS NEWS

- **Despite the furlough of 7,800 agency employees, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reduced its long backlog of claims during this month's government shutdown.**

The agency's Veterans Benefits Administration's weekly workload reports show the backlog in the number of veterans' benefits claims pending for longer than 125 days dropped by approximately 900 cases between Oct. 1 and Oct. 16.

GENERAL HEALTH CARE NEWS

- **The Department of Health and Human Services has awarded more than \$8 million in grants to support research to aid the long-term recovery in areas hard hit by Hurricane Sandy in October 2012.**

HHS' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) will administer the grant through the Hurricane Sandy Recovery and Rebuilding Supplemental Appropriation Act of 2013.

Over the next two years, research will focus on physical and behavioral health aspects of recovery including community resilience, risk communication and the use of social media, health system response and health care access, evacuation and policy decision making, and mental health.

The grants require researchers to share their findings with each other and the impacted communities. This approach will bring together networks of community members and organizations needed to foster a strong recovery and to improve resilience as impacted communities continue to move forward rebuilding.

Nine grant recipients will receive a total of approximately \$5 million, and \$3.6 million will be available to support additional research requirements and resources. Academic institutions and organizations receiving grants are:

- American College of Emergency Physicians, Irving, Texas – approximately \$444,000 to study how health care systems were impacted negatively before, during, and after Hurricane Sandy and to develop comprehensive recommendations on how to strengthen health care systems going forward to treat patients effectively during disaster events:
 - Columbia University, New York City – approximately \$596,000 to assess how community-level factors such as economic development, communication, and social connections influence mental and behavioral health recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, and a second grant of approximately \$276,000 to assess the resilience of residents of high-rise public housing in responding to Sandy's impact.
 - New York University School of Medicine, New York City – approximately \$752,000 to

assess the resilience and response of a complex regional health care system impacted by Hurricane Sandy and the evaluation of patient care during and after the disaster.

- RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif. – approximately \$657,000 to explore how partnerships between local health departments and community-based organizations contribute to the public health system’s ability to respond to and recover from emergencies and contribute to resilience.
 - Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine, Stratford, N.J.– approximately \$681,000 to examine how social networks within neighborhoods play a critical role in determining resilience of older Americans exposed to disasters.
 - University of Delaware, Newark– approximately \$574,000 to identify critical factors that influence community resilience and use these factors to create a computer program that supports community resilience in New York City after Hurricane Sandy.
 - University of Maryland, Baltimore – approximately \$417,000 to determine how social connections in a community of Maryland watermen influence their individual behavior and how the behavior impacts disaster recovery after Hurricane Sandy.
 - University of Pittsburgh – approximately \$576,000 to study ways to minimize disruptions of access to primary health care services during recovery from major disasters, especially for at-risk populations.
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- **The U.S. Food and Drug Administration will complete its phase-out of all inhaler medical products containing chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) by Dec. 31, 2013.**

This effort is to comply with an international treaty to protect the ozone layer by phasing out the worldwide production of numerous substances, including CFCs, which contribute to ozone depletion.

While most inhaler products containing CFCs have already been phased out by the FDA, two products currently remain on the market: Combivent Inhalation Aerosol and Maxair Autohaler. However, these products will no longer be available after the end of this year. People with asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) who use these inhalers should talk to their health care professional about a prescription for an alternative treatment.

Inhalers are critical products for those persons suffering from asthma or COPD. In the United States, more than 25 million people suffer from asthma, a disease that affects the airways in the lungs and can cause coughing, trouble breathing, wheezing and tightness or pain in the chest. Additionally, 15 million people have been diagnosed with COPD, a serious lung disease that worsens over time. Symptoms can include chest tightness, chronic cough and excessive phlegm.

Most inhalers that used CFCs have already been phased out by the FDA. The inhaler that was most widely used—albuterol CFC inhaler—was phased out in 2008 and replaced with inhalers that use propellants called hydrofluoroalkanes (HFAs). There are many safe and effective inhalers available to treat asthma and COPD symptoms. All of these inhalers require a prescription, which must come from a licensed health care professional (a physician, physician’s assistant or nurse practitioner).

CFCs damage the ozone layer, a thin, outer layer in the stratosphere that acts as earth’s shield against the sun’s radiation. The United States and most other countries signed an agreement in 1987 called the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer to phase out the worldwide production and use of CFCs. In the United States, CFCs have been removed from such products as hairsprays, deodorants and air conditioning.

REPORTS/POLICIES

- **The GAO published “*Electronic Health Records: Number and Characteristics of Providers Awarded Medicare Incentive Payments for 2011-2012,*” (GAO-14-21R) on Oct. 24, 2013.** This report provides information on certain providers, including hospitals and professionals that were awarded Medicare EHR incentive payments for 2011 and 2012. Using data from CMS and other government and private sources, GAO determined the number and percentage of eligible providers awarded Medicare incentive payments; determined the amount of Medicare EHR incentive payments awarded to providers; and examined the characteristics of providers that were awarded Medicare EHR incentive payments. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/658534.pdf>
- **The GAO published “*Medicare Supplemental Coverage: Medigap and Other Factors Are Associated with Higher Estimated Health Care Expenditures,*” (GAO-13-811) on Oct. 21, 2013.** This report provides information about how Medicare beneficiaries with supplemental coverage compare to Medicare beneficiaries without supplemental coverage with respect to total health care costs and the sources of payment for those costs. In this report, GAO compares average total health care expenditures and sources of payment for Medicare FFS beneficiaries with and without supplemental coverage. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/657956.pdf>
- **The Institute of Medicine published “*Financing Long-Term Services and Supports for Individuals with Disabilities and Older Adults - Workshop Summary,*” on Oct. 22, 2013.** This report provides information about the costs involved with the 11 million adults with disabilities, limitations and functional impairments in the United States receiving long-term services and supports – such as assistance with eating, bathing and dressing – in order to live independently. <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/Financing-Long-Term-Services-and-Supports-for-Individuals-with-Disabilities-and-Older-Adults.aspx>

HILL HEARINGS

- The House Veterans' Affairs: Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs will hold a hearing on **Nov. 7, 2013**, focusing on VBA outreach, accessibility, leadership and staffing efforts to meet the needs of veterans living in areas remote from a regional office.
- The Senate Armed Services Committee will hold a hearing on **Nov. 7, 2013**, to examine the impact of sequestration on the national defense; with the possibility of a closed session in SVC-217, following the open session.

LEGISLATION

- **H.R.3306:** (introduced Oct. 22, 2013): Telehealth Enhancement Act of 2013 was referred to the Committee on Energy and Commerce, and in addition to the Committee on Ways and Means.
Sponsor: Representative Gregg Harper [MS-3]
- **H.R.3319** (introduced Oct. 23, 2013): To modernize the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, and for other purposes was referred to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and in addition to the Committees on Energy and Commerce, and Ways and Means.

Sponsor: Representative Darrell E. Issa [CA-49]

- **H.R.3322** (introduced Oct. 23, 2013): Eliminating Disparities in Diabetes Prevention, Access, and Care Act of 2013 was referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Sponsor: Representative Diana DeGette [CO-1] .

- **H.R.3336** (introduced Oct. 23, 2013): Inspiring Scientific Research and Innovation Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2014 was referred to the Committee on Appropriations, and in addition to the Committee on Ways and Means.

Sponsor: Representative Allyson Y. Schwartz [PA-13]

MEETINGS

- The AMSUS Annual Continuing Education Meeting will be held **Nov. 3-8, 2013**, in Seattle Wash. AMSUSMeeting.org
- The 29th Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) will be held **Nov.7-9, 2013**, in Philadelphia, Pa. <http://www.istss.org/Home.htm>
- The AMIA 2013 Annual Symposium will be held on **Nov. 16-20, 2013**, in Washington DC. <http://www.amia.org/amia2013>
- The Radiological Society of North America (RSNA) 2013: **Dec. 1-3, 2013**, in Chicago, Ill. http://www.rsna.org/Annual_Meeting.aspx
- The 2013 Special Operations Medical Association (SOMA) Conference will be held on **Dec. 14-17, 2013**, in Tampa, Fla. <http://www.specialoperationsmedicine.org/>
- The AAMA 2014 Conference will be held on **Feb. 25-28, 2014**, in Las Vegas Nev. <http://aameda.org/p/cm/ld/fid=98>
- The Heroes of Military Medicine Awards will be held on **May 1, 2014**, in Washington, DC. <http://www.hjfc3.org>

If you need further information on any item in the *Federal Health Update*, please contact Kate Theroux at (703) 447-3257 or by e-mail at katetheroux@federalhealthcarenews.com.