

Several years ago, the idea of a shared integrated management information system (SIMIS) was conceptualized. Community health leaders believed that an integrated information system would significantly improve the ability of community health centers (CHCs) to collect, manage and use information, in order to improve its ability to be more cost-competitive. As a result, the Bureau of Primary Health Care developed the SIMIS Initiative, with a focus to “strategically align health center information systems with business objectives in an effort to meet demands driven by competition in the marketplace.” In response to this initiative, the Illinois Primary Health Care Association began taking steps in 2000 toward turning the idea of a statewide practice management network for Illinois CHCs into reality. The idea indeed became reality in March of 2002, when the first community health center “went live” on IPHCA’s SIMIS Network, called “i-net.” At it’s peak, there were 19 CHCs in full operation on the i-net network.

Building upon the success of the i-net network, IPHCA and its member CHCs convened a committee in late 2004 to conduct an extensive investigation on Enterprise Practice Management (EPM), Electronic Health Records (EHR), and Electronic Dental Records (EDR) systems. The original evaluation committee was clinician dominated, and included representation from information systems and executives as well. During its first year, the committee drew upon the resources of the Illinois Foundation for Quality Health Care to assess CHC readiness, develop clinical scenarios for testing vendor demos (with the aid of CHC clinicians), and draft a vendor RFP. The RFP was a thorough, detailed document that covered 10 areas of concern: functional requirements, technical requirements, ASP support, training, support and maintenance, warranty and contract, implementation, references, purchase options, and pricing.

In August 2006, the RFP was distributed to 10 vendors. Based on the responses, the committee invited Allscripts, GE, Henry Schein, NextGen, and Mysis to provide demonstrations to a single audience of 37 CHC representatives, 15 of whom were clinicians. The demonstrations were scored, and the list of finalists was narrowed to Allscripts, GE, and NextGen. These three vendors were asked to complete the functional specification matrix in accordance with HRSA’s EHR guidelines, as well as provide references of current FQHCs or integrated primary care, dental, and behavioral health practices currently using their product.

In the mean time, the committee evolved from a theoretical evaluation group to an implementation network of five CHCs committed to the first phase of implementation for the health information network. Those CHCs are Central Counties Health Centers, Inc., Community Health Improvement Center, Chicago Family Health Center, Christopher Rural Health Planning Corporation, and Southern Illinois Healthcare Foundation.

In March 2008, clinical providers, executives, and IT specialists from the committee CHCs, along with IPHCA staff developed a detailed evaluation tool which allowed for prioritization of functionality and scoring of each product. This tool was utilized in April when a team of IPHCA and CHC staff traveled across the country for live visits at FQHC sites where the three products were in use. The lowest scoring product was eliminated from consideration, and IPHCA engaged Allscripts and NextGen in negotiations with the goal of contracting for the most effective product.

After an exhaustive process of researching and evaluating vendors, the Committee selected NextGen Healthcare Information Systems as the preferred vendor to implement its EPM, EHR, and EDR systems. The resulting new health information network is being called “e-net.”