

CMS in final tests of incentive management systems

By Mary Mosquera

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The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is conducting final testing of the electronic information systems that will handle registration, attestation and payments to healthcare providers participating in the upcoming health IT meaningful use program.

CMS has modernized systems, added functionality and will be ready to go into production with the administrative systems in January, when the incentive program kicks off, according to CMS chief information officer Julie Boughn, who spoke Nov. 5 at a health IT event sponsored by Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association (AFCEA) Bethesda chapter.

Providers who want to be eligible for the incentives must register through the agency's Provider Enrollment, Chain and Ownership System (PECOS), which is available online through the CMS Web site. PECOS manages, tracks and validates the enrollment of providers and suppliers in the Medicare program.

CMS will open registration for the incentive program in early January.

To qualify for incentives, providers must verify they have demonstrated meaningful use of certified electronic health records (EHRs) for 90 days. When providers are ready to verify that they are meaningful users, CMS will guide them to an attestation module, through which they will perform a combination of tasks describing how they met the requirements, including submitting some clinical quality measures, Boughn said.

"Behind the scenes, the systems are taking all that data in, looking through some of our legacy systems to check if you have a certain volume of medical claims to qualify, and then out spits an answer, 'yes you are a meaningful user,' and then we issue the payments."

CMS has said that providers can begin to submit attestation for meaningful use in April 2011 and that incentive payments will start in May.

The agency will further update its systems' capabilities throughout 2011 and annually thereafter as CMS and the Office of the National Coordinator raise the meaningful use bar, for example, to accept quality measures submitted from EHRs, Boughn said.

"CMS system milestones are very aligned to the CMS and ONC dates for meaningful use. You can pretty much tick off annually – 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 – that we have to have different capabilities ready along the way. In some ways, it's a new program every year," she said.

CMS will verify that providers have registered and enrolled in the Medicare program before they can receive Medicare EHR incentive payments. When providers enroll in the incentive program through PECOS, eligible hospitals and Medicare physicians will receive a national provider identifier, according to CMS.

Most providers also need to have an active user account in the National Plan and Provider Enumeration System (NPPES), which is a system that assigns unique identifiers to health plans and providers in exchanging health information.