Blue Button
Lessons for Business Opportunities

Although legislation facilitated the development of the Blue Button programs, it was not created directly through a Congressional mandate. It evolved from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's HITECH provisions. It was eventually adopted by many health care systems and providers and included in CMS' Medicare and Medicaid EHR Incentive Programs created by the HITECH Act.

The Blue Button Idea

After the passage of the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH Act) as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which appropriated $30 billion for provider payment incentives and the HHS Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONCHIT, now ONC), efforts began to promote the meaningful use of electronic health records.

The Markle Foundation Work Group on Consumer Engagement in January 2010 discussed the idea of connecting patients to their data to engage them in their personal health. In a blog on the topic, meeting attendee Kim Nazi, performance and evaluation manager for VA's My HealtheVet Personal Health Record, describes how the participants turned from EHR to giving patients access to their health data to share as they see fit. The Work Group developed a white paper detailing recommendations for a blue button to connect patients, providers and their data, detailing privacy policies and download capability with authentication and security safeguards.

By August 2010, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense had developed the Blue Button download capabilities for their VA and TRICARE beneficiaries and CMS later developed the capabilities for limited Medicare beneficiaries.

Lesson in Hindsight: Participation in workgroups and think tank discussions such as the Markle Foundation's can lead to business opportunities. It is important that these discussions involve both the end users with the problems and those with the technical expertise to address the issue. This is similar to NewWave's participation in HL7's discussions on an ePrior Authorization solution and its recent presentation at the CMS Connectathon.

Blue Button Prize Competition

In 2011, the VA Innovation Initiative (VAi2) announced the Blue Button Prize Competition to encourage widespread use of Blue Button personal health record (PHR) using VA's Blue

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Button download format outside Federal health care programs to benefit Veterans who receive care from non-VA providers.

VAi2 is a department-wide program that solicits the promising innovations to increase veterans' access to VA services, improve the quality of services delivered, enhance the performance of VA operations, and deliver those services more efficiently. This competition was possible due to the America COMPETES Reauthorization Act of 2011 (Section 105), which allows agencies to hold competitions to stimulate innovation that has the potential to advance the mission of the respective agency.

RelayHealth won the competition with its one-click download of the continuity of care document (CCD). RelayHealth showed that it had upgraded its PHR to use Blue Button technology, and at least 25,000 of its physicians offered the new Blue Button functions to their patients.

In September 2011, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) launched a website to advocate cross-industry use of the Blue Button. It collected pledges of Blue Button adopters such as insurers, pharmacies, and healthcare organizations.

In 2012, the HHS ONC assumed responsibility for coordinating Blue Button strategy and nationwide growth. This included the expansion to Blue Button+, pilots and challenges that resulted in 17 new Blue Button+ compatible health care apps.

Meaningful Use Program Adopts Blue Button Function
In 2014, the CMS EHR Incentive Programs, Stage 2 Meaningful Use for physicians and hospitals included a Blue Button function to "provide patients the ability to view online, download and transmit their health information."

The Medicare and Medicaid EHR Incentive Programs (now known as the Medicare Promoting Interoperability Program) were created by the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH Act) as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Launched by CMS in 2011, the programs encourage certain physicians, hospitals, and critical access hospitals to adopt, implement, upgrade, and demonstrate meaningful use of certified electronic health record technology (CEHRT). To qualify as meaningful users during Stage 1, providers and hospitals had to meet core objectives such as e-prescribing, computerized provider order entry, or providing patients with an electronic copy of their health information upon request.

In 2012, a rule was finalized to govern Stage 2 of the programs for attestation in 2014. The Blue Button functions were part of the Patient Engagement objectives.

Lesson in Hindsight: The VA competition, the promotion of Blue Button by the RWJF and the inclusion in the Interoperability Program marked an acceptance of the technology and goals of Blue Button. There might have been business opportunities with health systems, providers and health insurers to develop Blue Button capabilities.