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Information exchange providers seeing benefits

By: [Jean DerGurahian/ HITS staff writer](#)

Times are changing for health information exchange organizations as they continue to mature and provide meaningful data to participants, according to industry executives.

Results from eHealth Initiative's 5th annual Survey of Health Information Exchange at the State and Local Levels [indicate](#) HIE providers are starting to see benefits from being involved, said Emily Welebob, senior vice president of strategic planning for the Indiana Health Information Exchange, which participated in the survey. The exchange of clinical data such as lab results have shown doctors how useful exchanges can be to ensuring faster and accurate diagnosis, she said. "The impact is getting easier to see."

But obstacles remain. Despite results that show HIE organizations are beginning to report financial returns on investment, developing a sustainable business continues to be a challenge for them, according to the report.

And this year there were fewer reports of new HIE organizations starting up, which shows how would-be participants are struggling for initial capital to start an exchange organization, according to Renea Steele, director of the office of Health Information Technology and Transparency in the Georgia Department of Community Health, which participated in the survey. "It's the financial climate," she said. The state has given grants to organizations to help them start an information exchange provider.

A total of 130 HIE organizations at different stages of development responded to the survey. Responses from exchanges considered to be fully operational are detailed in the report in an effort to share ideas and practices with other HIE organizations, according to eHealth.

Of the 42 fully operational HIE organizations that responded to the survey, 69%, or 29, said they had seen a return-on-investment in 2008, up from 10 that said the same in 2007. About half of the 42 said they were focusing on clinical messaging, results delivery and clinical documentation, and the number of HIE providers exchanging lab data increased to 26 in 2008 from 19 in 2007, according to eHealth's survey results.

Clinical information remains the crucial part of any exchange, participants say. Emergency department information, medication history and details of episodes of care in various settings provide a broad picture for providers to ensure patients receive the right care, Steele said.

Clinical messaging has been the core business of Indiana's HIE organization since its inception, said Tom Penno, chief operating officer. One participating hospital has been able to save about \$200,000 a year in courier services because of electronic messages, he said.

Indiana, considered by eHealth to be a "stage 7" HIE provider that encompasses a broad spectrum of participants, touts its organization as offering a sustainable business model that can be copied in other regions. By building on a base of clinical messaging then adding more services the HIE provider has been able to demonstrate the benefits of exchanging information, Penno said.

For HIE organizations that are considered operational, the next challenge is being able to exchange information with each other, Welebob said. Managing privacy and security concerns as well as new technologies that continue to arise are the issues they focus on, she said. "It keeps us busy on how are we are going to deal with it."

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