Health information technology (IT) applications have demonstrated the potential to improve quality of care while reducing costs. Improving the quality and completeness of the health data available to providers may reduce unnecessary procedures, smooth transitions in care, and expand the care available in the home or delivered remotely through telemedicine. Despite the significant promise of health IT, however, complex problems continue to challenge providers and hospitals. Health IT products can face obsolescence, compatibility problems, slow returns on initial investment, privacy and security threats, and lack of buy-in from providers and patients alike.

NORC is conducting several ongoing projects for the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), the government agency focused on addressing these challenges and fostering diffusion of health IT to hospitals and doctors’ offices.

The NORC Approach

NORC’s expertise spans the breadth of the health IT field. Its work has taken NORC from the implementation process for individual organizations—including technology selection, technical assistance, and evaluation capacity-building—to industry-wide issues such as workforce development, diffusion to rural or safety-net practices, and assessments of innovative, “blue-sky” applications. NORC’s knowledge of health IT extends beyond familiarity with today’s leading systems, and includes strategic thinking about the changes and challenges the field will face in the next decade, such as interoperability, patient-facing technologies, intellectual property issues, and advanced clinical decision support.

NORC is especially renowned for multi-mode evaluations that facilitate the synthesis of findings gathered through both quantitative and qualitative methods. From claims data to end-user focus groups, a variety of tools can be used to assess technologies and evaluate their implementation. Much of NORC’s work draws on the insights of technical expert panels, one of the most effective ways to stay current with the ideas and concerns of the thought leaders who represent a wide range of stakeholder groups.

Sample Projects

Evaluation of the Beacon Community Cooperative Agreement Program. For the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), NORC is conducting an overarching evaluation of this key program implemented through the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act. The Beacon Community program funded 17 communities to test innovative strategies for leveraging health IT to improve the quality and efficiency of health care. NORC’s evaluation relies on Medicare claims data, case studies, site visits, and key informant interviews to achieve four goals: 1) Assess the Beacon Community program’s goals of improving quality, cost and efficiency, and population
health; 2) Assess the impact of different health IT-enabled interventions on key program outcomes; 3) Identify key factors associated with the success of specific interventions; and 4) Identify key lessons learned from implementing these interventions.

**Evaluation of the State Health Information Exchange (HIE) Cooperative Agreement Program.** This evaluation provides a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the planning, implementation, and operation of the State HIE Cooperative Agreement Program. The evaluation examines the different approaches and innovative methods states are taking to facilitate information exchange, the challenges and barriers faced by the states, and key lessons learned. Findings from the evaluation will provide critical, formative feedback to ONC and state HIE grantees. Major evaluation activities include: reviewing state strategic and operational plans, conducting discussions with state HIE leadership, conducting case studies, surveying states’ Cooperative Agreement Programs, and reviewing and analyzing grantees’ data. NORC is also providing technical assistance to states in designing and implementing the states’ evaluation plans.

**Opportunities for Building a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Data Infrastructure.** The Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010 requires the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to build data capacity for patient-centered outcomes research (PCOR). In partnership with AcademyHealth and the Center for Medical Technology Policy, NORC is developing a conceptual framework policy paper that provides structure and guidance for identifying PCOR Trust Fund investment opportunities and conducting an environmental scan of the current state of PCOR infrastructure and its gaps. In addition, NORC and its partners will convene up to eight advisory workgroups with a series of experts and develop topic papers that provide insight into key issues. Finally, NORC and its partners will develop a final strategic opportunities report identifying potential short- and long-term investment opportunities for consideration by HHS.

**Evaluation of the Information Technology (IT) Professionals in Health Care Program.** NORC evaluated the IT Professionals in Health Care Program, which used American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding to launch university and community college training and educational programs nationwide and to create new training curricula and a competency exam. NORC developed a series of evaluation measures and data collection instruments to gather information from program administrators, students, faculty members, and employers. Throughout the course of this three-year project, the team visited more than 20 programs and conducted surveys, focus groups, and on-site interviews of students and graduates, as well as analyzed administrative data. The study used both quantitative and qualitative data to: 1) Support improvements as the Program evolved, 2) Assess the success of each of the Program’s components, and 3) Assess the success of the Program overall.