

[Health information exchange boosts quality, cuts costs](#)[| Print |](#)

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In America's competition-based health care market, it can be tough to get rival care providers to work together and share information. Organizers of the [Jefferson Health Information Exchange \(JHIE\)](#), are proud of the way southern Oregon health care providers are cooperating to streamline the flow of patient information in order to improve care and reduce costs.

Guided by the [Jefferson Regional Health Alliance \(JHRA\)](#) and consulting firm [Advances in Management \(AIM\)](#), southern Oregon hospitals such as Providence and Asante, public health agencies, clinics, and independent physicians have all collaborated over the past two years to form JHIE, a new non-profit corporation that facilitates electronic communication among providers.

The [Affordable Care Act](#) has been a catalyst for such cooperation because it requires and rewards meaningful electronic information exchange among providers. "The ACA has really motivated a lot of folks to do things in different ways," says Anne Alftine, MD, Project Coordinator for JHRA. "Overall, the ACA is about health care transformation, improving care and reducing costs. Those are also the goals of health information exchange."

Due to decentralization of the health care system, technology challenges and the difficulty of getting a diverse group of competing interests to agree on anything, establishing a regional Health Information Exchange (HIE) program is not easy. But Gina Bianco, president of AIM and acting director to JHIE, says implementing HIE has been notably smooth compared to other regions she's worked with.

"There are communities that attempt, but don't always succeed," she says. "What makes HIE succeed in this community is the willingness of people to really cooperate and put competition aside and focus on the best interest of the patients."

JHIE services are being rolled out in three phases. The initial phase, launched in January, allows providers to electronically send and receive information such as patient referrals and lab results in real time. "The current phase is really a point-to-point exchange from one health care provider to another. Doctors do that today via fax and phone. HIE allows them to do it electronically," says Paula Wheldon, a project manager for JHIE.

JHIE is now working on phase two, which will give authorized care providers the ability to search a patient's clinical records from other providers and contribute information for other providers to see. The final phase, set to roll out in 2015, is more broadly focused on public health reporting and statistical data analysis.

Although JHIE's benefits to patients are obvious, such broad medical-record search capability could make some patients nervous about privacy issues. Wheldon, Alftine and Bianco emphasize the safety of patient records, noting that the system will meet [HIPAA information security standards](#) and include access controls to prevent unauthorized use, such as a requirement that there has to be a clinical relationship between the provider and patient for any medical queries to take place.

JHIE's primary focus is improved efficiency and care; however, it is also expected to lead to greater cost savings for the health care providers and the patients. JHIE is too new to quantify the savings yet, but Bianco says that other communities have seen significant savings. "With HIE, we avoid duplicating documents or procedures, and we save money related to technology and not having to build multiple interfaces. Also, from the patient's perspective, not having to have duplicate tests and avoiding additional copays can be a tremendous savings," said Bianco.

Alftine and her colleagues are proud of their efforts. "It has taken a lot of teamwork, drive and energy to get JHIE off the ground," she says. Bianco praises the grass-roots effort that led to the formation of JHIE, "This isn't just some organization imposing its will; it's truly a community driven project with the patient at the center."

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